

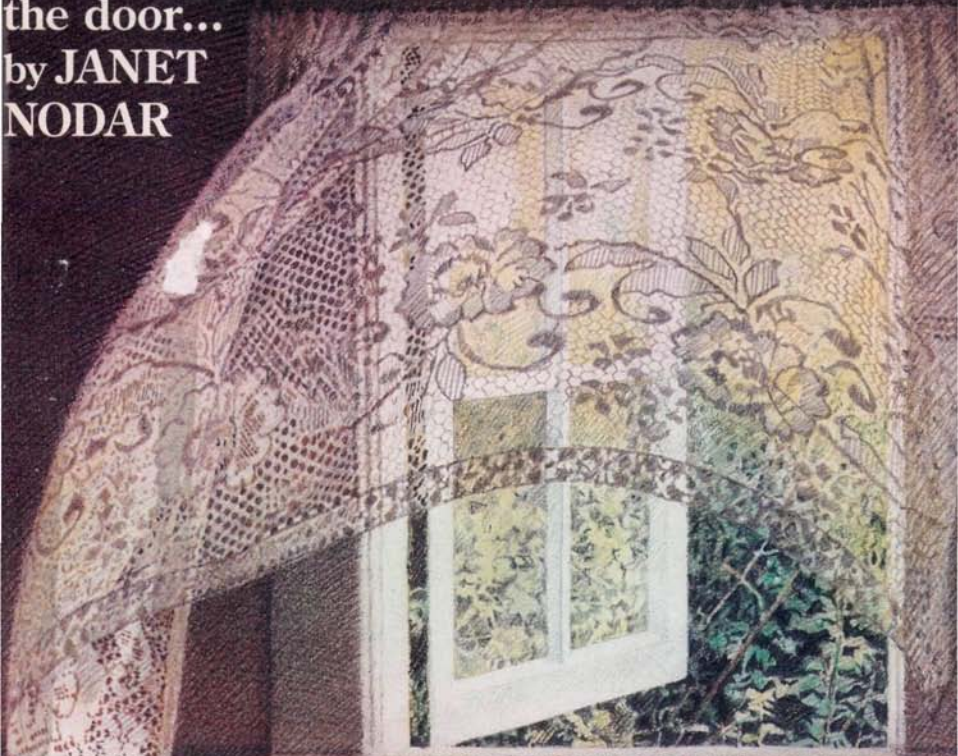
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 1999

THE CALLERS

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the strangers knocked on
the door...

by JANET
NODAR



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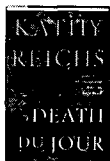
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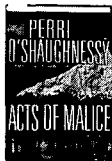
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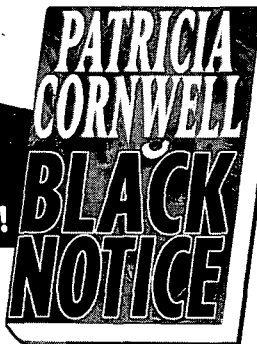


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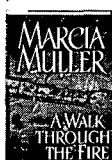
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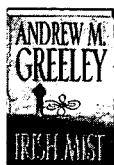
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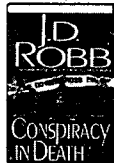
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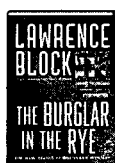
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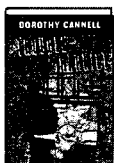
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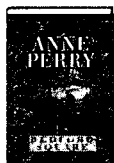
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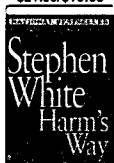
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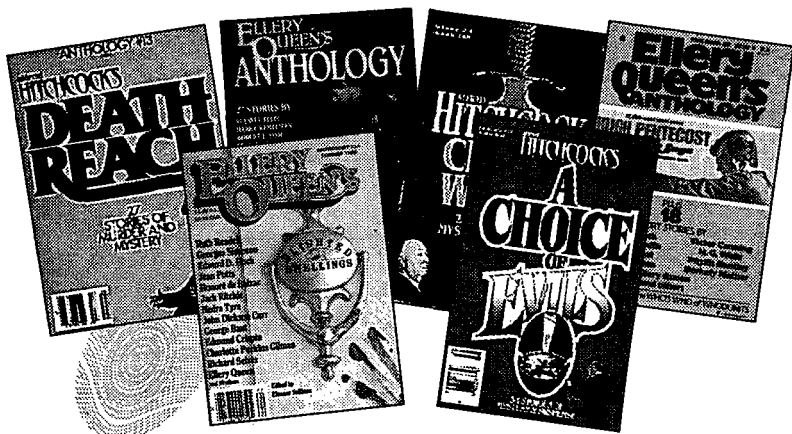
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

We've had occasion lately to consider the year 1899. That was the year of birth of a varied collection of distinguished people—in fact, it was quite a year in that regard, one that still thoroughly resonates in our lives in its centennial year.

First, of course (for us), was that matchless director Alfred Hitchcock, born on August 13, 1899. His movies have long since become classics, his style has entered into the fabric of storytelling in film, countless scenes have become part of our national treasure. Many of us remember as well his shivery television shows, his rotund silhouette thereon, his portentous "Good e-e-evening."

And then there is his magazine! Another notable 1899-er was Mignon G. Eberhart, born July 6th. Ms. Eberhart's more than fifty novels and her many short stories—

the latter starring her mystery-writing heroine Susan Dare—have delighted suspense-seeking readers ever since, and we've reprinted one of them, "The Calico Dog," as this issue's Mystery Classic, a centennial *hommage*.

Who else was born in 1899? We haven't space here to detail careers, but there's no need to—the list speaks for itself. A particularly significant year in the entertainment and literary worlds, 1899 saw the birth of Fred Astaire, Duke Ellington, Vladimir Nabokov, James Cagney, E. B. White, Jorge Luis Borges, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Charles Boyer, Eugene Ormandy, Gloria Swanson, George Cukor, Charles Laughton, C. S. Forester, Hoagy Carmichael, Noel Coward, and Humphrey Bogart.

And, um, another "Al." Last name of Capone.

New authors in this issue . . .

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Barry Baldwin, author of "A Bit of a Treat," has lived in Canada for many years but was born in England, in Lincoln, and educated at the University of Nottingham, where he received his Ph.D. in 1962. Now retired, he is a professor emeritus of classics at the University of Calgary (Canada) and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1997.

He tells us that he "emigrated, first to Australia in 1962, thence to Canada in 1965. Have taught and lectured in various countries (e.g., England, Australia, Canada, U.S.A., South Africa). Languages: English, French, Italian, Greek (modern), German, Albanian (perhaps an unusual special interest). Am addicted to English soccer, cricket, baseball, Australian football, and food."

Mr. Baldwin has published "twelve books and approximately six hundred articles on Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and eighteenth century history, literature, and language. I also publish on Albanian history and language; have written satirical stage revues, a (twice-performed) one-act play, and have both won and set literary humour competitions in Canada and the U.K."

Since his retirement he has taken up writing short stories and has been published in *Jewish Affairs* (South Africa), *Hellas* (U.S.A.), and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. His story for the latter, "Do You Take This Man?" in the De-

cember 1998 issue, has been nominated by the Crime Writers of Canada for an Arthur Ellis Award for Best Mystery Short Story of 1998.

Andrew Vachss, author of "Pigeon Drop," turned to writing novels and short stories about fifteen years ago; *Choice of Evil*, his thirteenth novel (and eleventh starring his character Burke), was recently published by Knopf.

Mr. Vachss is an attorney-consultant in private practice in New York City, handling only matters relating to children and youth.

Educated at Case Western Reserve University (B.A., 1965) and the New England School of Law in Boston (J.D., 1975), he "worked as a field investigator for the United State Public Health Service in Ohio and as a social casework supervisor in New York City" in the 1960's.

"He has directed programs for urban migrants in Chicago, a re-entry center for ex-convicts in Boston, and a maximum security prison for youth in Massachusetts. He also worked as a community organizer, a criminal-justice planner, a designer of institutions and programs, and for the relief effort in war-torn Biafra."

Mr. Vachss' first collection of short stories, *Born Bad*, was published by Vintage in 1994; a second collection, *Proving It* (which will include "Pigeon Drop") has been scheduled for publication in October of this year (also Vintage).

LWS



"Hey there," called a female voice. "Mrs. Hannahan?" Miss Ida peered through the screen, suspecting a sales pitch. The girl wore a white shirt and a khaki skirt. Her brown hair was pinned back with a silver barrette. The stocky young man with her wore belted gray shorts and a striped shirt. A burgundy SUV, presumably theirs, was parked in Miss Ida's lumpy driveway. She didn't know these two, but she knew their look; they matched the other couples remodeling Decatur Street's elderly houses, painting the rooms hunter green or teal or claret, filling the back yards with swings and sandboxes.

"We don't want to bother you, Mrs. Hannahan," the girl said. "Is this a



good time? We're not selling anything, I promise." She smiled. Her lips were colored a bright, slick pink, and her brown eyes were round and inquiring.

"What can I do for you?" Miss Ida asked.

"I'm Ashley Potter, this is my fiancé, Trey Graham. We're from Pascagoula." The girl waved a hand vaguely westward, towards Mississippi. "I'm researching my family tree. My mother's family was from Mobile, and my great-grandmother may have lived in your house when she was little."

"We bought it thirty-nine years ago." Miss Ida undid the screen door's hook and the couple came up on the porch. Ashley had crow's feet; these two were not as young as she'd assumed. "When we were first married."

"Tyler David Graham the Third," Trey said to her, in a surprisingly insubstantial voice. He held out his hand. She shook it although Miss Ida still found this particular civility awkward.

"Ida Maureen Hannahan," she said. "The house was built in 1896. Who was your great-grandmother, Ashley?"

"Mary Catherine Davidson. She married an Ingraham."

"Davidson—that's right," Miss Ida said. "Dr. Davidson built this house. Three doctors' families have lived here; we're the third." It was still Miss Ida's habit to refer to herself in the plural although her husband had been dead for six years and her children were almost middle-aged. She knew the house's history. She knew the whole street's history. She was not unusual; so did everyone else on Decatur Street. It was a popular topic. "And I think I knew an Ingraham family years ago. I myself grew up on Spring Hill Avenue. I was born next to the Bragg-Mitchell mansion. Our house is gone now, though. They tore it down when they built those apartments." The faintest disquiet shaded her voice as if this violation, which had occurred before World War II, still troubled Miss Ida.

Ashley opened her purse and took out a black and white photograph of a woman wearing a pale, ankle-length skirt. Her face was turned stoically against the sunlight, and her hair was pinned on top of her head. Although no burglar bars defended the downstairs windows and no screen enclosed the front porch, the bungalow she stood in front of was quite familiar to Miss Ida. "It's our house!" she said.

"Yes, ma'am, that's what we thought," Ashley said, coming so close that Miss Ida caught a trace of sour breath. She stepped back gently. "My mother told us she thought it was on North Decatur," Ashley said. "We drove up and down and finally realized your house was the one in the picture. So long ago—look how small the trees were." Now the branches of the oak trees shaded the house, and their roots disrupted the sidewalks.

"Is this your great-grandmother?" Miss Ida asked, tapping the sunlit woman.

"My mother says it isn't. She thinks it's a cousin." Ashley fanned herself just once, quickly, with the photograph and put it back in her purse.



"Would you all like to come inside out of the heat?" Miss Ida was perspiring though her dress, and her head hurt a little. Trey's forehead was beaded with sweat.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," he said.

The couple sat on the velvet Victorian sofa in Miss Ida's front parlor. Miss Ida scanned the room and found it orderly enough. ShaNeece had dusted on Wednesday. The house stayed neat now, since Bill was no longer around to dump his pockets out just anywhere and children only made forts with the furniture or left water rings on the mahogany on the occasional Saturday. The evening light touched the Persian rug, the bell-curved mantel clock Miss Ida had inherited from her grandfather, the enamel box filled with Confederate uniform buttons.

"What a lovely home," Ashley said.

"Thank you," Miss Ida said, gratified. "Would you care for a cold drink?" Her guests nodded. She went to the kitchen and poured glasses of sweet iced tea. She sliced a lemon and arranged the slices on a china plate. Without a break in her rhythm, this also part of her preparations, she poured a shot from the bottle of sherry in the cupboard, drank it, bit into a lemon slice, and rinsed her mouth out with water. She spread a linen square on a silver serving tray and arranged the glasses, the plate of lemons, three teaspoons, tiny lace napkins.

"Can I help you?" Ashley had followed her. "Let me carry that for you." Miss Ida nodded although it annoyed her a hair, the girl walking right through the house like that. Ashley looked around the kitchen. "Right out of the fifties," she said. "I love it."

"This old stuff?" Miss Ida said. Ashley picked up the tray. Miss Ida winced as the glasses slopped. The girl was not quite what she had first appeared. She had a febrile air. She lacked something—poise, charm. Miss Ida felt a bit sorry for her.

Trey, head canted, was examining the bookshelves beside the fireplace. Ashley tried to set the tray down gently, but it shimmied and the spoons jittered. She chose a glass, wrapped a napkin around it, and crossed the room away from Miss Ida. She tripped on the rug's fringe and caught herself on a small polished table with her free hand. "Oops!" she said. "Just a little spill. Didn't get on anything but me, thank goodness!"

Miss Ida turned her attention to Trey, to give Ashley a second to collect herself. "Those are my husband's books."

"And where is your husband today?" Trey asked. Again Miss Ida was surprised at his bodiless voice. Ashley frowned at him; she'd already realized Miss Ida was a widow. Trey didn't seem too bright, really.

"My husband passed away several years ago," Miss Ida said.

"I'm sorry," Trey said, embarrassed.

"Please don't worry about it."

Ashley and Trey looked at each other. Trey raised his eyebrows. Ashley put down her glass and wiped it off with her lacy napkin. She opened



her purse and got out thin white latex gloves, a pair of scissors, and a roll of duct tape. Trey grasped Miss Ida's forearms and lifted her to her feet.

"We're not going to hurt you," Ashley said, putting on the gloves. "Turn her around." Trey turned Miss Ida around. "Put your hands behind your back, please."

Miss Ida obeyed, passive as a daffodil. She didn't feel afraid; she felt confused. "What are you doing?" she asked. They ignored her.

"There's some good things in the gun cabinet," Trey said in his feathery voice, gripping Miss Ida firmly while Ashley taped her ankles together. He did not look at Miss Ida, he might have been holding a door ajar. "Where are your gold glasses?" he asked.

Miss Ida blinked, puzzled. She sometimes wore blue reading glasses.

"Dining room. In the buffet," Ashley said. "But first move the car to the back of the house. We can't go in and out the front."

Trey carted Miss Ida to the downstairs bedroom and propped her against the pile of pillows like a stuffed animal. He shut the door.

Miss Ida still thought of this as the guest room, even though she usually slept here now that the stairs bothered her. Her crossword puzzles, her tissues, her crocheting, and the remote all lay on the bedside table just as she'd left them that morning. Miss Ida heard a car start. She heard the back door bang. She heard glass break and wood rip.

Hoppy Brubeck, Miss Ida's across-the-street neighbor, noticed her open drapes and lit-up house about ten o'clock and came to check on her. She was on the floor, crying with frustration. She'd wet herself. Hoppy, a gentleman, did not notice.

Trey and Ashley had smashed the gun cabinet and taken Bill's guns. They'd stolen his coin collection in its old fashioned blue folders. They'd taken the antique clock and the Persian rug. They'd taken Miss Ida's jewelry and her mother's sterling flatware. They'd taken Bill's stereo and the big TV and the gold-rimmed liqueur glasses and decanter he'd bought for her in Venice in 1969. They'd taken the tray she used to serve them tea.

A paramedic sponged the duct tape goo off Miss Ida's wrists and ankles. He took her pulse. He wanted to take her to the hospital, but Miss Ida declined. "No, thank you," she said. "I really don't feel that it's necessary." She could not stop trembling. The paramedic poured her a shot from the bottle of sherry in the kitchen. She drank it gratefully. She was ashamed of herself. Bill's death, her parents' deaths, the miscarriage she'd suffered between Victoria and Renata—although she had faced these events bravely, they simply had not prepared her for Ashley and Trey.

After she changed clothes and brushed her hair and put on lipstick, Miss Ida showed the police where Ashley had stumbled and caught herself on the table. They found palm and finger prints. Sergeant Haston, a solidly built black man with a bristly black and silver mustache, interviewed her in the parlor. Miss Ida served him a glass of tea even though



it was by this time very late and tea wasn't really appropriate. Making coffee just seemed too difficult. She used the everyday spoons, since Ashley had taken the good ones. Miss Ida had never had a black person who didn't work for her in her parlor before, but she was not prejudiced. She knew people who would have thrown the glass and spoon away after a black person drank out of them, but she was not like that.

"I feel so stupid," she said to the sergeant. "They fooled me completely."

"It's not your fault, Mrs. Hannahan," Haston said. He sipped his tea once and set it down. "These two are professionals. I'm sure they've fooled many people besides yourself."

"That girl is a liar's liar," Miss Ida said. "All that hooley she gave me about her mother's family." The police had found no record of Ashley or Trey or their families in Pascagoula, naturally. Of course it had never occurred to Miss Ida to write down their car's license number. The burgundy SUV was probably not theirs anyway.

"Well, her prints will be on the national computer system now," Haston said. "She can't hooley her way out of that. We'll get her, sooner or later."

Her children arrived and said, "Mama, you need to move." They'd been telling her so for years, hadn't they? She didn't need to be all alone in that big old place. And on the bright side, when she sold the house she'd make a fortune now that midtown real estate had gone so high.

Miss Ida didn't want to move, though. She loved Decatur Street. She loved her house. It was like an extension of her body, intimate as her knees; leaving it seemed nearly as impossible as leaving Mobile itself. Too, Ashley and Trey had made a fool of her. She hated to run away because of them. She did, however, spend the rest of the weekend with Renata and Jim. They went to church with her on Sunday morning, where Miss Ida was the center of attention, mentioned in the sermon *and* the prayers.

In the car on the way home she apologized to her daughter. "The things they took really belonged to you and Victoria and Bill Junior, and to your grandchildren. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, Mama," Renata said. "You're all right, and that's all that matters." Tears welled in her eyes. Renata meant what she said, but Miss Ida knew that it wasn't that simple. Her children were struggling to hide their regret, but they did care, especially about the loss of their father's treasures. Miss Ida felt that she had let them down.

Hoppy Brubeck lived across Decatur from Miss Ida in his grandmother's homely Victorian mansion, a house overflowing with the leavings of a hundred and four years and thirty-odd lives. He occasionally hauled out a few boxes of venerable junk and had a yard sale; the antique dealers had learned to circle the block early every Saturday morning to see if he was in the mood. Wondering where Ashley and Trey had found the photograph of her house, Miss Ida remembered Hoppy's sales. She called him at Second Magnolia Bank, where he was a trust officer.



"Waall, I remember a little gal who was fascinated with a box of old pictures coupla weeks ago," Hoppy said. "She bought an armload of old clothes, too."

"Was there a photo of my house in there?"

"I don't know. Coulda been. There was a mess of 'em. Even one of the chicken coop Miss Trudy used to keep in the back yard." Miss Trudy was what he, and everyone else, had called his grandmother.

"What did the girl look like?"

"She was downright memorable. Real, real short blonde hair, like a boy's. Blue eyes, nice figure—nothin' like a boy in that department. She was wearing one of them little teeny T-shirts; it showed her tummy. She had a ring through her belly button. I asked her if she was engaged." Hoppy snorted cheerfully, still pleased with his joke.

"Blue eyes?" Miss Ida said.

"Blue as my toothpaste," Hoppy said.

"I guess it wasn't Ashley Potter, then," Miss Ida said. "Unless she was wearing a wig and brown contacts when she came to my house."

"A disguise?"

"Why would anybody go to so much trouble?" Miss Ida said. "We didn't have anything particularly valuable."

"Bill had some nice guns."

"But still. Why not just break in at night? Or while I was gone? Why do it this way? It's so peculiar."

"You can't figure out that kind of people, Ida Maureen. They're just a bunch of outlaws," Hoppy said.

"Did the girl say anything else?"

"Waall, she asked me about the street. About house prices, and who still lived here, the old families," he said.

"Did you mention us?"

"I might could have. I don't remember. She didn't ask about you in particular."

Miss Ida said goodbye, hung up, and called him back instantly. "Hoppy!" she said. "That girl had been in my house before!"

"How do you know?"

"She knew about my gold glasses, the ones Bill bought for me in Venice. I never use them any more; they've been put away for years." The six liqueur glasses and the tiny decanter, almost like a perfume bottle, were of handblown glass and covered with tiny gold flowers and curlicues. The glasses' rims and the decanter's stopper had been dipped in gold. Miss Ida had once thought them beautiful. As she got older, they had begun to seem a bit excessive, a bit vulgar. And one of the glasses was chipped. "Trey asked Ashley where they were, and she knew. They took them."

"Are they worth a lot of money?"

"I hardly think so," Miss Ida said. "No more than one or two hundred dollars. They weren't antiques or anything."



“It was my fault that glass got chipped,” Renata said the next afternoon. She and Miss Ida were swinging on the front porch. “Renata, you knew better than to play with those,” Miss Ida said.

Renata cut her eyes at her mother, but her voice stayed calm. “We used to sneak them out when we were playing dolls. They were the queen’s treasure.”

“You and Victoria?”

“No,” said Renata. “Me and Cinny. Remember her? That little girl who lived in Miss Trudy’s rental house for awhile?”

Miss Ida shook her head. “How old were you?”

“Eight. Maybe nine.”

“What was her last name?”

“Cooper. Roper. Something like that. You caught her taking off her top for Bill Junior one time.”

“Oh my heavens, *that* girl?” said Miss Ida. Her memory suddenly produced a vision of a fair, skinny child in dirty clothes.

“She had white hair and blue eyes,” Renata said. “Her little sister was just like her. They called her Little Bit. They always had runny noses. You told us to be nice to them, but you were always making them go home. You never let them spend the night. You said they might have lice.” Renata said all this coolly, as if she herself was openminded enough to let her own children be friends with little ruffians, although it wasn’t true. Still, Miss Ida shifted uncomfortably. There were times when she wished Renata’s memory were not quite so exact. “Isn’t it time for you to go pick up the children?” she said.

Renata looked at her watch and jumped up. Miss Ida went inside and looked at the greasy skillet left from the bacon sandwiches she’d made for lunch, and left it where it was. She didn’t care.

The rental house, a shotgun shack at the corner of Decatur and DuRaine, had belonged to Miss Trudy, who had always refused to take any hints about rentals being inappropriate for the neighborhood. After she died, Hoppy sold the house to a homosexual couple, and now it had shining hardwood floors and a historical plaque. The sickly, barefoot children, the refrigerator on the porch, the greens and corn and tomatoes growing out back—these things were long gone.

When Hoppy got home from work, he dug out his grandmother’s rent book. Miss Ida read over his shoulder. “Here it is,” he said, turning toward her so that his breath touched her cheek. Miss Ida jumped. Hoppy turned pink. “Ethaleen Roper and two little girls,” he read. “Moved in on June 12, 1977. Late with the rent every month. Moved out owing for three months on November 10, 1978. That’s about the right time, isn’t it?” Miss Ida nodded. “Blue eyes and white hair; sounds like my photograph girl. Now what? You gonna hire a detective to find her?”

“No, no. I’ll call Sergeant Haston.” First, however, she got out Hoppy’s



phone book and found the column of Ropers. The ninth time Miss Ida said, "May I speak to Ethaleen Roper?" the woman who answered said, "Speaking."

Miss Ida caught her breath.

"Hello?"

"This is Mrs. Spellman, with the phone company," she said. "We've received a complaint about your service—I just wanted to verify it with you."

"What complaint? What are you talking about? My bills is paid," the woman said. "I pay my damn bills."

"No, no," said Ida. "That's not the problem. It concerns a Miss C. Roper. She requested a calling service that she said she never received. I wanted to verify—"

"What? That's crazy. Cinny ain't lived with me for fifteen years."

"I see. That is puzzling," agreed Ida. "Can I get that name from you?"

"Cynthia Roper. She's my daughter. She lives in Biloxi now. She's got nothing to do with my phone no more."

"Well, thank you so much. We'll get this straightened out," Ida said. She hung up even as Ethaleen was asking her another question. Her heart was pounding. She thought for a moment that she might throw up. Lying was harder than she'd remembered. Hoppy had a strange expression on his face; this aspect of Ida's character seemed to have taken him by surprise. She copied down Ethaleen Roper's address from the phone book.

"Let's go visit," Hoppy said. They drove out to west Mobile in his Lincoln. Ethaleen Roper's bleached clapboard house was in a tiny lane off a busy suburban street. A red brick wall separated it from the sloping black roofs of a new subdivision. A fat woman sat on the porch shelling peas, white bowl balanced on her thick thighs. She studied Hoppy's car, her hands busy.

"We don't have to get out, Ida Maureen," Hoppy said.

"I want to know."

Hoppy sighed.

The woman's gray hair was pinned on top of her head in a doughnut-shaped wad. Her face was deeply creased, her eyes a luminous, piercing blue. Ida suddenly knew her. She remembered this woman, younger but not much thinner, looking through the kitchen door one hot summer afternoon long ago, asking to borrow some sugar or maybe looking for her children, something like that. She wanted to make friends; she had a tenuous, hopeful look on her face. Ida had said something kind but discouraging and shut the door. It was not reasonable of Ethaleen Roper; they were not the same kind of people. Anyone with sense would know better.

"This the house that might be going up for sale?" Hoppy called.

"You know so much about it, you can ast the landlord," the woman said.

"No offense, ma'am." He offered his hand. "Charles Jemson Brubeck." He waved at Ida. "This is my assistant, Mrs. Pierce." Ida swallowed a giggle. He was trying to impress her, to copy what she'd done on the phone.



"Ethaleen Roper." The woman frowned at Ida.

Hoppy stepped up onto the porch. "Real estate values really going up," he said. "When I was young, this was all dairy farms around here."

"Huh," said Ethaleen. "Things do change, don't they?"

"Now it's worth a fortune."

"Not to me it ain't. I reckon I'll have to move. I like it here, too. Been here a long time. It's close to my doctor," Ethaleen said. "I got a bad heart. I got to be near the doctor."

Ida stepped onto the porch also. Shielded from Ethaleen's eyes by Hoppy's body, she looked through the picture window into the house's tiny living room. In the family photograph on the wall opposite, Ethaleen embraced two girls with white hair. The older one was Cinny Roper, about twelve. Ida tried to imagine her with brown eyes and brown hair, fifteen or so years older, but it was not easy to turn her into Ashley Potter. Her eye fell to the wood-look table beneath the picture. She inhaled sharply. "Where did you get those glasses?" she said.

"My daughter gave them to me," Ethaleen Roper said. "It was my birthday yesterday."

"They're very unusual," Ida said.

"She's nicer to me than she used to be," Ethaleen said. "Now that my younger is gone."

"We've got to be getting along," Hoppy said.

"May I use your restroom, Mrs. Roper?" asked Ida.

Ethaleen, surprised, shrugged. "I guess. Ain't too clean in there." Hoppy made a sharp, containing gesture, but Ida ignored him.

Inside, she wasn't sure what to do.

If she put the glasses in her purse, they'd break. If she just carried them out, Ethaleen would see, and she might scream or punch Ida or call the police or who knew what.

The bathroom's vinyl floor was coated with dust and hair; the shower curtain was scabbed with mildew. Down the hall were two small bedrooms. A huge, unmade bed filled the first one. The second held a smaller bed and some girlish curtains but was clearly Ethaleen's dressing room. Clothes were heaped at the foot of the bed, hairpins and hair-clotted brushes on the dresser.

A baby doll lay propped against the bed's deflated pillow. It was not an ornament, it was a real doll, one that had been played with. Ida picked her up. Her hair was gummed to her scalp, her face gray with dirt, her feet twisted freakishly under a flounced pink gown. Some child had colored in her eyebrows with an ink pen. Faded blue ink also tattooed her forehead. Ida looked closely and saw a drawn-on circlet of stars and flowers with a diamond at the center of her forehead—a crown.

Ida stuffed the doll into her purse and went rapidly out and down the steps, calling, "Thank you." Ethaleen still shelling peas, watched her get in the car, staring as if her memory had begun to coalesce.



"You'd better call the police now, Ida Maureen," Hoppy said, buckling his seat belt. "If you don't, I will."

"All right," promised Ida, and she did when she got home but Sergeant Haston wasn't there, and it was obvious to Ida that the woman on the phone did not recognize her name or know anything about the case. She decided to call back in the morning.

Late that night her phone rang. She could hear breathing, but no one spoke. "Who is this?" she said. The line went dead. Should she call somebody? Hoppy? He'd think she was flirting. Her children? Then she'd have to explain so much. She checked the locks again and went to bed.

The sound of fracturing glass woke her up. Fear pulled her to her feet and walked her towards the back of the house. Ida stopped just short of the door that led from the hall to the kitchen. She heard voices.

"A baby doll."

"I want it back."

"I'll buy you another one." It was Trey's light voice.

"It was Bitty's." Ashley's—no, Cynthia's voice.

"It's not her. It's just a toy." Cynthia didn't answer. "Cin," Trey said.

"Where would Miss Ida have put it?" Cynthia said.

"Christ, a damn doll," Trey said. His disgust hung in the air like gas fumes. "If you'd told me what you were doing, I wouldn't have come."

"I don't need you."

"Yeah, all right," he said, but he didn't leave. The floorboards creaked, and Miss Ida heard the door between the kitchen and the dining room swing open. Their steps made the floor vibrate. She slipped into the kitchen. Bits of glass scrunched under her feet.

"She's not in her bedroom," Cynthia said. The hall light came on. The door between the dining room and the kitchen swung open again, and Ida saw Trey's silhouette. His hand slid up the wall, searching for the kitchen's light switch. He turned his head to listen to Cynthia call, "The front door is still locked. I'm going upstairs," and Miss Ida grabbed the cast-iron skillet off the stove and smacked it into his skull. Half-congealed bacon grease cascaded over him. He lurched toward her and skidded on the suddenly slick floor. Ida hit him in the forehead with the skillet, harder than she'd ever hit anything in her life, and Trey fell down.

Ida raced to the front hall closet and got the doll. The key was over the front door; she turned the bolt as Cynthia came pounding down the stairs. Ida flipped on the porch light and ran out, Cynthia right behind. Ida turned to face her; Cynthia blocked her path to the screen door. "Is this what you want?" Miss Ida said, jiggling the doll. Cynthia took a little step toward her but froze when Ida tugged at the doll's head. It twisted off easily. The body was full of matted white fluff, like rancid cotton candy.

"Stop that!" Cynthia said, her voice rising. "That's not yours!"

Miss Ida threw down the head; it rolled across the porch floor. She



pulled at the doll's arm. It came off, and she threw it down. She pulled on the other arm.

Cynthia snatched the doll's torso out of Ida's hands. "You old bitch," she said. She gathered up the head and arm and cradled the pieces. "You're a bad woman. You're mean!" She sounded like a child.

"I am not," Miss Ida said.

Cynthia looked down at the dismembered doll and back up at her. "But look at what you did," she said.

"It's not real. It can't feel. It's just a doll," Miss Ida said. "It didn't bother you to take my things, my husband's things, did it?" Cynthia stared at her, and suddenly Miss Ida felt ridiculous even though she knew she was in the right.

"Hey, hey!" It was Hoppy, running across the street. "Ida Maureen! Ida Maureen! What in God's name are you doing?" She could hear sirens. Trey, covered with glass and blood and bacon grease, stumbled through the door. He groaned and fell to his knees and vomited.

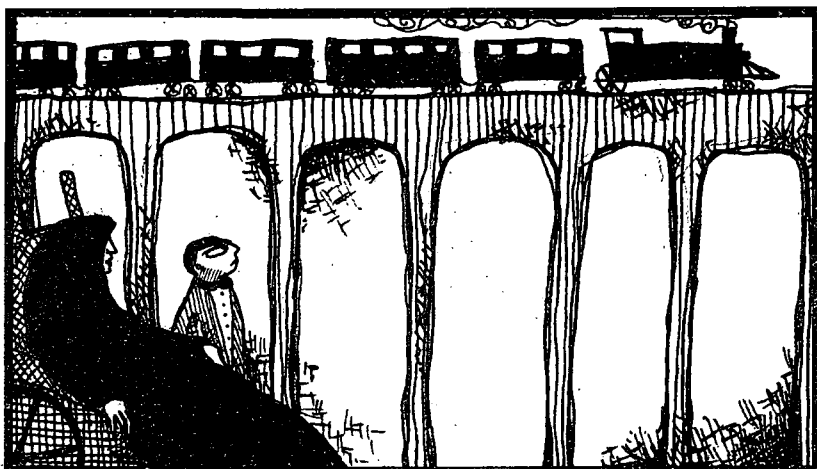
"I believe I may have given that boy a concussion," Ida said.

Ida was in the tabloids: "GRANDMA PUMPS IRON—SKILLET, THAT IS!"; "GRANNY'S LETHAL WEAPON!" The Venetian glasses, the only stolen items that she ever got back, were used as evidence in the trial. Of course, her insurance eventually reimbursed her for everything else. Ethaleen Roper was in court for both days of the trial, her swollen feet stuffed into high-heeled shoes. She never spoke to or even appeared to see Ida.

Hoppy had to testify, too. He didn't enjoy it; it made him mad. He didn't speak to Ida for a week, and then one day he came over with a picture he'd found of her house with a horse and buggy drawn up in front, and she knew things were going to be all right.

Ida wrapped the liqueur glasses and the decanter in bubble wrap and boxed them up and put the box way back on the top shelf in the hall closet. She was tempted to write to Cynthia, in jail up in Wetumpka, but she never could think of exactly what to say. It crossed her mind to tell Cynthia she could have the glasses now if she still wanted them—but of course that would have been just too silly.

One day that fall a scrubbed little couple stopped to watch Ida's realtor pound a FOR SALE sign into her yard. They cooed over the hardwood floors and squealed at the kitchen and bought the house for a great deal more than Ida and Bill had paid for it. When Ida locked the door the last time, she felt unexpectedly buoyant, like a leaf on water. Although she was in fact wearing a sensible pants suit, it was almost as if she'd dissolved away a hard outer shell, to be left with only her true pink and naked self. A week or two later she realized she'd left the Venetian glasses behind. It would have been easy enough for her to get them, but she never bothered; it almost surprised her to find that they were not that important to her.



A BIT OF A TREAT

Barry Baldwin

I was organized for a visit to my Uncle George. He lived up Yorkshire way, in one of those towns you never think about unless you follow Rugby League: Batley, Dewsbury, Hunslett, that kind of place. My father was never sorry to see me going off anywhere. A WVS person had been roped in to look after me on the train, since she had relatives in the same part of the country herself and was planning a trip to see them that coincided with mine. She had to cry off at the last minute, however, so my father simply took me to the station, bought me a ticket, and dumped me there.

IS YOUR JOURNEY REALLY NECES-

SARY? asked the poster under which I stood, holding my gas mask box in one hand and a little cardboard suitcase containing a change of clothes and my night requirements—thick striped pajamas and a face flannel—in the other. I didn't know I shouldn't have been traveling by myself, but in the war there weren't many questions about what's a nipper like you doing without your mam and dad? "Leaving home, are you, son?" said the ticket-puncher at the barrier, but he wasn't really bothered.

"No, I'm going to see my Uncle George, then I'm coming back."

"They ought to have got you a

different class of ticket, then; they could have saved on it."

The train was packed out, mainly with soldiers and their kitbags. The corridors were so jammed that the only way I could get to the lavatory was to shout out that I wanted to go and then be lifted up and handed there over people's heads. It was stuffy with all the other passengers pressed up against you. A lot of the carriages were dark, since their lightbulbs had burned out or been stolen. When you got to a station, it was hard to tell where you were—the signs were all painted out, and the announcements were only given once in a garbled voice. One of the soldiers, on finding I had nothing to eat, gave me a packet of dried egg sandwiches which I promptly swapped with a lady in uniform for a single fancy cake.

I did better in the food department at Uncle George's. He seemed very keen that I should eat as much as possible and was forever shoving stuff at me. I particularly liked what he called his oven-bottom cakes, round affairs lathered with marge or drippings. Uncle George was a funny kind of relative for me to have. He was always smartly turned out in wide check suits, a different one for every day, in spite of clothing coupons. Not only did he have a nice house with the lavatory inside, he even had his own bowling lawn. "A proper crown green," he insisted, "not one of those flat things they go in for down south." What was more amazing, he let me play on it, not appearing to mind that I made no effort to learn the proper way. He would stand, or more often sink

down into a deck chair, wreathed in pipesmoke, sometimes calling out things like "It's all in the contours," or "Watch the variable," but generally just watching with a tolerant smile as I staggered round the green with the heavy lignum vitae bowls, throwing them with both hands as far as I could without bothering to "allow for the bias" and flinging the little white jack all over the place. What with the mess I made of the grass and the dangers my jack-throwing posed to the windows of his nearby greenhouse, I must have taken years off his life. Yet the closest he came to a rebuke was when he once gave me a certain look and half-said, half-sang:

"Barnsley born,
Barnsley bred,
Thick in't arm,
Thick in't head."

But since I knew I wasn't from Barnsley, I was more puzzled than scared.

One day Uncle George announced that I was "in for a bit of a treat." I pestered him with questions, but he just kept repeating, "You'll see." I hoped it was the pictures, or even a walk on the moors; I was getting fed up with the bowling green, and there was nobody to play with. I had hinted at the pictures once but made the mistake of mentioning George Formby. "Nay, lad, I'm not forking out good brass to watch that daft ha'porth."

At last he called out, "It's here." About time. For ages now, I'd been cleaned up and not allowed to do anything more than sit and look at some old comic annuals that Uncle George hadn't previously produced.

Normally I would have been quite happy with this. I liked the annuals with their cunning characters whose adventures gave some good ideas about how to outwit parents or cause huge damage with catapults. And it was a change from home, where my father tended to chase me out of the house if he caught me with "your head buried in a book again," often adding, "All that reading will give you brain fever." But my imagination kept wandering from the stories to this "bit of a treat" Uncle George had promised.

"It's here," he called out again. "Frame yourself," ordering me out the front door although I was already up and running. To my astonishment and delight, a car was pulling up outside, a big black one looking like a set of boxes joined together. "You wonder where she gets the juice to run that contraption," said Uncle George, more to himself than to me. "Mine's in the garage for the duration. Hers can't get far on a gallon of Pratt's Motoring Spirit, that I do know." All I knew was that I had never been in a motorcar in my life.

The driver's door opened, and a soldier got out. Well, I thought he was a soldier, what with his peaked cap and smart uniform with braid all over it, not to mention the way he clicked his heels and snapped to attention even if he wasn't so good at that as the German soldiers in Pathé newsreels.

"Why is a soldier driving the car?"

Uncle George laughed. "He's no soldier, he's the chauffeur." I had no idea what that meant, but who cared? It was obvious from the way

the uniformed whatever-he-was opened the door as Uncle George steered me towards it that I was about to go on my first ride involving something that wasn't my tricycle or a train or utility bus with wooden seats. And I got to sit in the front!

"Another young tyke, then, George."

"Aye."

The car moved off, quite noisily, which only made things better. Uncle George sat in the back, exchanging remarks about mysterious grownup subjects with the chauffeur, who impressed me all the more by being able to keep turning his head to answer while performing a ceaseless round of maneuvers with his hands and feet. Once Uncle George said, "She's not like some I could mention, nowt a pound and bumpin' with the weight," to which the chauffeur replied, "Aye, there's some as marry midden for't muck and then get fair bothered wi't stink."

Don't ask me what the scenery was like, or how far we went. Except for staring triumphantly out of the window and sticking my tongue out at some other children looking enviously at the car and me from a red Yorkshire Traction bus as we overtook it, I never had my eyes off the chauffeur and what he was doing. Although I now knew that it only meant driver, I had been quite taken by this new word "chauffeur," so that's what I was calling him in my mind.

All too soon the car slowed down and turned off the road up a long driveway surrounded by lawns and

all sorts of flowers. The chauffeur pulled up outside a great big house. It had a doorway with pillars. There seemed to be thousands of windows. For one wild moment I thought we had come to where the king and queen lived, but how could this be London?

Uncle George tapped me on the shoulder. "We're here."

"Wait while I get down," the chauffeur said as I tried and failed to unlock my door. He was out of his side and round the car and had it open in a flash. I was able to get out without his helping me, which he didn't really offer to do. But he was standing at attention again. I had no idea why a grownup should be doing this for me. Some sort of game, I imagined.

"She's round the back."

"Aye, well, I suppose she would be," replied Uncle George. He put one arm around my shoulders, pointed towards the house with the other, and began to recite:

"I would live, if I had my will,

In an old stone grange on a York-
shire hill,

Ivy encircled, lichen streaked,
Low and mullioned, gable peaked,
With a velvet lawn and a hedge
of yew,

An apple orchard to saunter
through,

Hyacinth scented in spring's clear
prime,

And rich with roses in summer-
time,

And waft of heather over the hill,
Had I my will."

I hadn't the foggiest idea what he was on about and was none the wiser after he said it was from a grand

poem called "My Will" by Arthur Benson. Poetry meant school, and who wanted to think about that? For a moment, though, I did feel important that he should have come out with all this to me.

There was no question of our going in the house by the front door. We followed the chauffeur as he led the way along a wide flagstone path with a row of flowers down each side. After quite a long time, during which he strode farther and farther in front of me while Uncle George lagged behind, I came around into the back.

More lawns and flowers, of course, all at different levels and stretching as far away as the eye could see. I wondered who could possibly mow all that grass and felt sorry for any child who might happen to live here and have to do it.

The chauffeur halted, waiting for me to get up to him. As he had done throughout the car ride, whenever I had caught his attention, he gave me a fixed smile. I had the idea he was sizing me up for something and briefly wished I weren't there. I got my own back in a way by shouting, "Hurry up," to Uncle George, who was by now puffing along as slowly as Gaffer Jarge in a Rupert Bear story.

"She's over there, by the bay window."

"Aye, well, I suppose she would be."

Once again I followed the chauffeur. What was a bay window when it was at home? It turned out to be just a big window, very disappointing. Sitting in front of it was this old lady. I couldn't see much of her be-

cause, although it wasn't a cold day, she was all covered in blankets and things. I couldn't get over her face, though, as the chauffeur led me close up to her. It was like that of a young lass, almost one as young as Ann, who lived next door to us at home. She was in one of those special wicker chairs they used to have for old people who couldn't walk. Bath chairs, they were called; I've never been sure why.

"Here we are, my lady," proclaimed the chauffeur, drawing up to full attention in front of her.

"So I see," she replied in a voice twice as loud and deep as his. "You may go, Cowperthwaite. Send Fothergill out here."

Cowperthwaite gave a kind of salute and backed away before turning and walking normally. He eventually vanished from sight round a corner of the house. I wondered who the old lady was and where we were and why we were there. Especially as she did nothing but look at me for the next few minutes, and she appeared to pay no heed to Uncle George at all.

Finally she said, booming again, "So this is he."

I was half expecting Uncle George would reply, "Aye, well, I suppose it is," but instead he just said, "That's right," in a quavery kind of voice like a child who thinks he's in trouble with a grownup but doesn't quite know why.

"He is not very big. From your account I had expected something very different. Still, now that he is here, we may as well. Where's Fothergill? Ah, there he is."

Another person had appeared

from the house. This time, I thought, it *must* be a soldier, from the way he marched down the path to us. But when he got close enough to see, he turned out to be dressed in a black coat and trousers that looked too big for him and a striped waistcoat. Except that he wasn't smiling, he reminded me of Old Heathers, the butler on the labels of Robinson's Lemon Barley Water bottles.

"Take us to the trains."

Take us to the trains? Were we going home by train, then? Why not in the car? And why were we going when we'd only just got here?

Without saying a word Fothergill started to push the old lady in her bath chair over the lawns towards a section of the garden that had lots of bushes and small trees in it rather than flowers, as well as paths and what I thought were trenches running all through and around it. I looked back for Uncle George, but he turned away and began to gaze at the house. A loud "Come along, boy" from the old lady had me scurrying after her.

The minute we got into this foresty place, I forgot all about Uncle George. The entire area was laid out with model trains and railway lines, signals, stations, bridges, the lot. I had never seen anything like it. At home I had a Hornby Dublo engine that clattered around a warped circular track, four carriages, two coal trucks, and one signal that worked some of the time.

Fothergill wheeled the old lady down one of the paths in the middle. Beckoning me forward, she said to him, "Carry on." He went over to

the first station, where a streamlined express train with about a dozen passenger coaches was lined up along the platform in front of a bank of signals in Stop position. He indicated with a wave of the hand that I should get myself down to the other end. I began to, then veered left and followed a branch line into a clearing, where it ran across a bridge over a pond that was filled with big fish. I picked up a stick and tried to prod them to the surface, but they were too busy down at the bottom, playing their own game of gliding in and out of a heap of old bones and other rubbish. Anyway, I had time for only a couple of jabs before Fothergill came steaming in. He grabbed me by the collar and frog-marched me to where he had originally pointed.

When he saw I was ready, Fothergill set the train going, then started after it at a walking pace that was faster than my father could run. He kept this up for the rest of the afternoon, sometimes deciding where to go next but more often than not moving only when the old lady called out an instruction. What with one thing and another, she kept him on the move. Encouraged by this, I began to boss him about as well. I knew enough to realize that to be ordered around by a child was the worst thing possible for a grownup, especially a servant. No doubt he managed to convey his feelings in his face, but I was too busy chasing the trains and operating the points and the signals to take any notice. The only other thing I could think about was that I could hardly wait to get back

home, my real one, not Uncle George's, to tell my friend Tony all about it. I was sure he had never played with such a train set.

I did notice, though, that whenever I glanced over at the old lady she was already watching me. Fothergill she never seemed to look at. But he was the only one to whom she shouted orders. She never said a word to me. Nor did Fothergill, the entire time. He was as snooty as both the Western Brothers rolled into one. Or perhaps he couldn't talk. There was a girl like that in our street; my father often said she should be put down.

What with roaring around after the trains and the general excitement, I eventually started to run out of steam. At another shout from the old lady, Fothergill, who didn't seem in the least bit fagged out, motioned to me to go over to a wooden table and bench at the edge of the garden. They were well away from where the old lady was. He went away and came back with a big silver tray on which there was a jug of cherryade, a plate of sandwiches, Battenberg cake, éclairs, and trifle in a cut-glass bowl.

She must not know there's a war on, I thought.

I tucked in, aware without being put off by it of Fothergill hovering over me and the old lady's relentless gaze. The sandwiches were a meat I had never tasted before. Some newfangled brand of Spam, I decided, wolfing them down. The cherryade was different as well, cloudy as though something else had been mixed in and sweeter than I was used to. It was all right, but without

quite knowing why, after one glass I said I didn't like it and told Fothergill to fetch me pop instead. I at last began to wonder about Uncle George, where he had been all this time, and why he hadn't reappeared to have his tea with me.

When I was done, reluctantly leaving half the trifle, Fothergill led me into what I had thought was a big shed where they kept gardening tools but which turned out to be a proper lavatory. Since I had already leaked a bit, this was largely a waste of time, but I pretended to do a lot, since I knew from experience at home to keep quiet about such accidents. Looking back, of course, I expect Fothergill was well aware of the situation.

Back in the garden Uncle George had finally materialized. "Take the shrimp away," the old lady commanded. Uncle George made no reply. He just told me to say thank you for the trains and the tea, which I did. As though by magic Fothergill melted away, to be replaced by Cowperthwaite the chauffeur. He drove us home at a much faster speed than the one at which he had brought us. Neither he nor Uncle George said a word to each other. I tried to impress them with untrue tales of my brilliant handling of the trains, but they took no notice.

When we were back in front of Uncle George's house, Cowperthwaite said, "Well, that were a waste of time."

Uncle George, looking more at me than him, shook his head. "Aye,

she took against him the minute she clapped eyes on him. I'd have done better to try down at Harry Ramsden's fish and chip shop. I don't know why she bothered to go through all the rigmarole with the trains."

"Nay, she'd never miss a chance, come what may. You know how she used to love watching his lordship and Master James play with them, before their accident. It's the only other thing as keeps her going."

I never stayed with Uncle George again. I kept hoping that I could, but whenever I asked my father, I got no answer until the last time; then, along with one of his special backhanded clips across my left ear, I was told that he'd been dead for ages now. The only person who said he was sorry was my friend Tony, although when I'd tried to tell him about the trains, he'd just laughed and swore I was making it all up.

When I'd got back from Uncle George's, my father was not only more depressed than usual to see me, he acted as though he hadn't expected me to return at all. At that time I didn't connect this with the fact that he'd only bought me a one-way ticket. And it was years later, after reading in one of my comics about that Countess Elizabeth of Rumania and how she kept herself beautiful with the blood and flesh of young servants, that the way everybody had looked at me and the old lady's face and the meat sandwiches and the cherryade and the bones in the fishpond all clicked into place.

THE LEGEND OF PEMADUMCOOK

David Braly



The dog days of August had arrived, and even on the Maine seaboard the hours dragged oppressively. All the things we could do in summer at Camden and Rockport we had already done repeatedly that summer, and of course our doing them was itself a dull repetition of our having done them during previous summers.

We had been summering at Camden all my life, exactly as my parents and yes their parents before

them had summered there all their lives, staying always in the same white clapboard cottage that my great-grandfather had bought in 1907. As seaboard cottages go, it's nice enough. It has the mandatory screen door, the wood lattice-bordered porch, and a kill-for panoramic view of Camden Harbor with all its comings and goings of lobster boats, cabin cruisers, and sleek white sailing sloops.

The problem lay strictly in the

repetition. The excitement I had experienced in childhood at the prospect of spending the summer Down East had worn away, a victim of the same old repetitious events and behavior summer after summer, and I was too young to have developed the nostalgic love of tradition that made my parents and their friends so fond of Camden. True, even a few years ago while in my most cynical period of adolescence I found the first fortnight there after months in the city a wonderful change: the boats; the water lapping at the shore; the woodsy smells drifting in the spring air; the canoeing on Lake Megunticook; the sleeping to the sound of foghorns while lying under an ancient blanket on the creaking porch swing; the catching up on events of school and sport with friends not seen since the previous summer; and of course the foods peculiar to our summer lives, ranging from the locally produced maple syrup on thick waffles with fresh blueberries for breakfast to the frequent dinner helpings of thick chowder made from the "secret recipe" Great-grandfather had won on a bet in a game of horseshoes the same year Lindberg flew the Atlantic.

But our arrivals were in June and this was August. Hot, humid, slow August. And as I said, none of it was new and fresh the way all of it had been when I spent those first summers here as a child.

My friends shared this ennui. Five of us had hung out together every summer. As children we had swum and biked together, as teenagers we had motored and chased girls together. We were all preparing

to start college the following month and were experiencing the impatient anticipation that such an approaching adventure creates. Bink, like myself, was entering Harvard. Bink's cousin Jock would go to Brown. Chip was bound for Princeton. Win, the true scholar in our little group, had had his choice of Amherst, Brown, Georgetown, Harvard, Princeton, Reed, Stanford, Swarthmore, and Yale. His father, a loyal alumnus of Yale, had persuaded him to go there as everybody had always expected he would, but at least he'd had fun filling out the applications.

We were all seated one morning on the edge of the big front porch of Jock's house, which commanded a pleasant view of the sloops anchored at the Wayfarer Marine dock. We had been languorously discussing the ample physical endowments of a certain girl we had all dated and had finally fallen into silence. It continued for several minutes. Nobody seemed to have anything to say, and I suspect nobody was trying very hard to think of anything to say. It was that sort of morning.

Finally Chip said, "I heard on the radio that a big storm is coming in."

We all looked skyward. Yesterday it had been clear and blue. Now there were dark grey clouds.

"An August thunderstorm," added Chip. "Strong winds, thunder, heavy rains, the usual."

"Peter Rugg weather," said Win.

I almost asked—but caught myself. All of us except Win exchanged glances. Win had played this particular game often. He had an annoying habit—or rather, annoying prac-

tice because he did it deliberately in full consciousness that it was annoying—of saying something that only he could reasonably be expected to know the meaning of, yet saying it in a natural manner that implied we should all understand what he was talking about. Asking him to explain was tantamount to surrender. We never liked asking. We hated asking. But we usually could not resist asking. I mean, how can you possibly allow a statement like “Peter Rugg weather” to hang in the air?

Bink caved. “All right,” he said, “I’ll bite. What does ‘Peter Rugg weather’ mean?”

“Oh!” said Win, as though surprised to hear this question. “I thought you knew.”

Sure he did.

“An inexplicable phenomenon occasionally occurred during violent thunderstorms in early America,” explained Win. “Really spooky stuff, you understand. Someone out in the storm would encounter a stranger on the road. The stranger was wearing old fashioned clothes and was seated beside a small child in an open carriage drawn by a black horse. The stranger, wherever and to whomever he appeared, always asked the same question. He always asked if he were headed in the right direction for Boston. Usually he was headed the wrong way.

“A conversation would ensue. It would come out that the stranger and the child had actually started for Boston many years earlier, but being overtaken by a violent thunderstorm, the stranger had been unwise enough to vow that he would

either see home that night or never see home again.”

“And this stranger was Peter Rugg?” asked Jock.

“Right. Actually, this folklore began in 1824 with the publication of a popular short story by William Austin called ‘Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.’”

We moaned. This buildup to a big letdown was another of Win’s practices. We’d believed we were hearing authentic superstition. Its birth as a short story diminished it.

“I read about it in a book called *The Power of Blackness* by a professor of comparative literature at Harvard named Harry Levin,” said Win. “It deals with the grimness found in the writings of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville. I recommend it.”

We glanced at one another. Books that Win recommended tended to have fifty-word sentences, untranslated quotations in Latin and Greek, hundreds of pages of endnotes and bibliography, and a university press as publisher.

“Oh, it’s an easy read,” he added as either encouragement or insult.

For awhile we were silent again. The clouds were in motion, and by evening we would have our Peter Rugg weather.

I stared at the sloops at Wayfarer Marine and thought about the story. A dark tale indeed. Given the isolation and superstitions of people in those times, I could understand why it had left the realm of fiction to become folklore briefly.

“I would like to do that,” I said. “Write a work of fantastic fiction so believable that some people would think it true. Create a legend.”

"That'd be swell," agreed Chip.

For a moment nobody said anything further. Then Jock anted up.

"Or do something—not just write it but do it—that would have the same result," he said. "Set up a hoax that people would believe."

"Like Theodore Hook?" asked Win. "Anybody can do that by ordering a pizza delivered to someone else's house."

None of us knew who Theodore Hook was, but this time we didn't bite. Not that it mattered: we were already hooked by Peter Rugg.

"No," said Jock, "bigger than pizza deliveries. Create something that will end as folklore or legend or even as perceived truth. Endure. Not merely a brief hoax that will be forgotten in a week."

"You mean like Piltdown Man," said Win.

"Right. Or Mark Twain's petrified Indian. Or the crop circles in England. Or the Sasquatch tracks in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Or any number of other hoaxes that have fooled some or all of the people some or all of the time."

For a minute we sat there looking at the greying sky. It was I who finally spoke the thought: "What the heck, let's do it."

"What sort of hoax do you have in mind?" Chip asked me.

"Well, why not bring back Peter Rugg? He worked before; he might work again. We can borrow five cars. As for kids, Jock's little brothers and Bink's little sister would be three of them."

"The Gates kid could be the fourth," said Jock. "Skip's always with my brothers, and I'm sure he'll

play along. That only leaves us one kid short."

"No, it doesn't," said Win. "You'll only need four because there'll only be four of you. I've got to spend the evening with my parents visiting friends at Bar Harbor."

"Maybe we could do it tomorrow," said Bink.

"By no means," insisted Win. "This may be the last thunderstorm of the season."

I explained my plan, which was simply a modern version of the legend created by Austin's story. We would dress in old fashioned clothes and drive down different roads during the storm, each of us with a child seated next to him who would say and do nothing. We would have to forgo the black horse and the open carriage. But the remainder of the act would be bizarre enough. Every time we saw someone by the road we would stop and ask if we were going in the right direction for Boston. The peculiarity of this would cause anyone thus approached to tell others about it, and soon people would discover that it had happened in several locations simultaneously. The descriptions of the cars and their occupants, while possessing certain basic similarities, would vary widely. Before long, the story of what had happened would spread all over the area, maybe all up and down the seaboard. There would be inaccurate reports, false sightings, rumors—the works. We would become legend!

Everybody liked the plan as I outlined it except Win. He didn't say that he disapproved, but the skeptical look on his bespectacled face said

it for him as it always did when he believed he saw a problem the rest of us missed. Everybody stopped giving me verbal pats on the back and waited for him to tell us what was wrong.

"There's an obstacle to the success of your plan," he said. "Location. People in this area know you and probably will recognize any cars you may borrow. Even at the peak of the season Camden only has about twelve thousand people. Also, the summer people are too sophisticated to fall for it, and the native Mainers here, perhaps because of their association with us, are the same. Therefore, you should pull the hoax somewhere in the state's interior. The farmers and loggers who inhabit the central and northern parts of the state might credit the situation. People here won't."

We realized he was right. Jock went inside and returned a minute later with a Maine roadmap. Bink, Chip, and I had seldom ventured more than ten miles inland, but Jock and Win were familiar with many fishing areas between here and the North Woods. We agreed informally to let them pick the best location.

They discussed various locales while we all studied the map like generals preparing an invasion. Finally Win and Jock agreed that the best place for the hoax would be the vicinity of Millinocket, just east of the Longfellow Mountains and near the geographic center of the state.

They said it was an old mill town of about seven thousand people. The lake-dotted area was inhabited by the sort of Mainers they believed we

could hoodwink. It also had many rural roads we could cruise. Win was familiar enough with a nearby lake where his father used to take him fishing, Pema-dumcook, that he was able to describe in detail a good rendezvous point for us.

I believed that something would go wrong. We wouldn't be able to borrow enough cars or the parents wouldn't let the little kids go with us up to Lake Megunticook for the evening (which is where we told the parents we were going for an informal game of baseball) or the kids themselves wouldn't go along with the joke. Complicated plans usually fall apart because of one weak detail.

But not this one. Everything went as I'd planned. We got the cars, the kids, the old clothes, everything, and meanwhile the storm was rolling in strong but not too fast.

After rendezvousing on Bay View Street, we drove caravan-style to Bangor, where we stopped for burgers and shakes and to let the storm come closer. The food was a reward to the kids for helping us. Afterward we followed I-95 till it crossed the Penobscot River, then turned west toward Millinocket.

Dark clouds enveloped Mount Katahdin in the northwest. By the time we reached Pema-dumcook, the wind was gusting strongly and the air smelled like rain. Because we had to get the kids home before it turned late and because dusk came late in August, we couldn't wait for night, the time Peter Rugg was supposed to appear, but fortunately the storm began to blacken the sky quite nicely.

We stood talking by the parked cars while we waited for the storm to arrive in full force. Perhaps normally the area has a pleasant feel, but while the shades of a stormy evening lowered around us, the murky old lake appeared to me a bleak, dreary, melancholy place. Drooping branches of twisted trees sank oppressively low over the darkening earth, and wild vegetation reached out mournfully toward the shadowy waters of Pemadumcook. All of us, I'm sure, felt the desolate gloom there. A loathsome heaviness hung over everything. The kids, especially the little girl, felt it also and stood somberly silent, their eyes moving uneasily from one dusky area to another.

Suddenly lightning and thunder hit as one, flash and boom, accompanied almost immediately by heavy rain and a strong, steady wind. Tree branches were whipped around violently, and the lake began to be tossed by rough, choppy undulations. The black overcast had already turned the world dark.

"It's time," said Bink. "Let's get this act on the road."

"Right," I agreed. "You all know which road each of you is to take. Remember: we've got to return to Camden before it gets too late. We meet back here at eight sharp."

"I'll be back here at eight," quipped Jock, "or I'll never be back here at all."

We laughed and climbed into the cars. The kid riding with me was Jock's brother Kip (not to be confused with Jock's other brother Trip or with Skip Gates). I had borrowed a five-year-old Lexus from a neigh-

bor. Chip and Bink had borrowed cars from their parents, while Jock had brought his own Range Rover. We each headed separately toward our designated road in search of gul-ible Mainers.

My route took me through the town of Millinocket, then north up a grim little road that snaked past somber, dark, doleful conifers that formed as grey and decayed a forest as I'd ever seen. The rain drummed on the car. The wipers smeared it across the windshield with a depressing steadiness. My headlights did little to illuminate the road ahead, and I strained my eyes trying to see it, fearful of colliding with a stray moose or some farmer's wandering Bessie. Were that to happen, what could I say to my parents or the Lexus owner, who all thought we were nearby at Lake Megunticook rather than halfway to the North Woods?

These thoughts burdening my mind, I continued to drive up the narrow, serpentine, lonely little road for almost half an hour.

"There!" Kip suddenly shouted. "Somebody's up ahead!"

He was right. We were overtaking a man walking beside the road with a shovel over his shoulder and a border collie at his heels. From the quaint manner of his dress it was obvious he was a Down Easter. Why he was walking along a forest road in the middle of a thunderstorm I did not know, and at the moment, I did not care. I had expected to find someone like him and accepted his appearance there as natural.

I pulled over a few feet ahead of him, and Kip lowered the window

on his side so I could speak to him when he came abreast of the car. Kip then looked straight ahead, zombielike, as was the plan. The man reached us.

"Excuse me, sir!" I hollered over the downpour.

The man stepped over to the lowered window and bent his head to look inside the car. I thought, what he must be thinking! I wore the most tattered old garments I had been able to find in our cottage, dating back to my father's own college days. Kip wore some of Jock's hand-me-downs, and, while I addressed the Mainer, the boy continued to look straight forward as though oblivious to the world. If only I'd had a black horse instead of a blue Lexus!

"Evenin'," the man said. He was a lanky fellow with a long, deeply faceted face and a bland expression.

"I'm afraid I might be lost and was wondering if you could help me. Is this the way to Boston?"

"Nope."

The man didn't appear shocked or even surprised by the question. No matter; I persevered.

"I must reach there this night. Which direction is it?"

"South."

"Which direction am I going?"

"North."

"So I should turn around and go the opposite way?"

The man looked down the road, then up it, and then down it again. Finally he said, "Pears so."

This wasn't what I'd had in mind. But it wasn't my fault. The man wasn't reacting right. How many people in Maine are asked by strangers about a road to Boston?

The man should have been bewildered. Maybe he just wasn't smart enough to be surprised.

"How far is it to Boston?" I inquired.

"It's a ways."

"Well . . . uh . . . thank you."

"Welcome." The man walked on.

Kip began to giggle.

"Stop that," I growled.

"'Bet," he said in his best Down Easter accent.

A glance at my wristwatch revealed that we had just enough time to reach Pemadumcook Lake by eight. I didn't want to give up, didn't want to return to report this meagre outcome, but had no choice. We had agreed on eight sharp, no exceptions, no excuses.

I turned the car around and wearily started back to the lake. The rain continued to flood the windshield while it drummed incessantly upon the roof. Every other moment the scene around us was suddenly lit by a bright flash of lightning.

Having admitted defeat, I was pleasantly surprised when I encountered a late opportunity to try to hoax the locals one more time. It happened in Millinocket while I was stopped by a red light at what I assumed was the main intersection. A local—clearly he was a local, in his checkered red and black hunting cap, his plaid shirt, his unfaded blue-jeans, his logger's boots—came out of a tiny restaurant and hurried through the rain to the crosswalk. When he started across, I lowered my window. "Hey!" I shouted. "Is this the way to Boston?"

"Yep," he said, still rushing into the street.

"Is it very far?"

"A ways," he said, and he was gone. Kip started to laugh.

I cussed at the retreating back of the Down Easter and meant it for all lunkheaded natives in general. When the light changed, I gunned the engine, anxious to get out of Millinocket and never return.

Arriving at the lake at seven fifty-six we found all the others there except Jock. Even before I spoke to them, I could see from their hangdog expressions that things had gone poorly. Discussion confirmed it. Chip had met with the same sort of dispassionate, laconic replies as myself, while Bink had failed to find even one person strolling on the isolated farm road he had been assigned. The natives had known enough to stay indoors during a violent storm, a revelation as surprising to us as it was disappointing.

We anticipated Jock's return at any moment and continued to do so for some time. By eight fifteen we were seething. He had broken our agreement. The storm had not abated; indeed, it got worse by the minute. We needed to return to Camden from "Lake Megunticook" soon or our parents—and the neighbor who lent me the Lexus—would become anxious. We developed three theories to explain Jock's tardiness. One, Jock and Trip had had car trouble (the Range Rover had broken down twice that summer). Two, Jock had typically paid scant attention to the passing of time. Three, having repeated the infamous words of Peter Rugg, Jock was playing a joke by pretending that he too was unable to get back. This latter theory was put

forth by Jock's brother Kip and quickly accepted as the most likely explanation.

By eight twenty we were all hopping mad, and Bink kept saying over and over again, "I'll kill him."

The Range Rover came roaring up at eight twenty-three. All of us older guys hurried over to confront Jock. He held his hands up in front of him and said, "I know, I know, I apologize."

"Where the hell were you?" demanded Bink. "We had an agreement!"

"I know. No excuses. It was my fault. I apologize."

He wasn't one of those people who apologize easily without thinking much about it. Jock's apology did mean something, even to Bink in the heat of his rage. Besides, Jock was the picture of frustration and self-reproach. He looked flat out miserable.

"I just couldn't give it up," he said. "It took me forever to find somebody outdoors and when I did . . . well, he didn't respond the way he should have. It was as if every day while he drove his tractor down the road people stopped to ask if they were headed in the right direction for Boston. 'Don't believe so,' he says, calm as you please. 'Don't believe so.' Nothing I asked seemed to surprise him. It was all routine as far as he was concerned." Jock shrugged. "The next man was exactly the same."

"That doesn't explain why you broke the agreement," persisted Bink.

"I told you: I just couldn't give up. I needed somebody to respond correctly. I kept looking for another

rube to hoodwink. We drove around and around, but everybody else was indoors."

"Which is where we should be," said Chip, sweeping his right hand over his slicked-down hair, causing water to cascade down his face. "Let's take this up later. Right now we ought to go home."

At that precise instant the world around us lit up while thunder shook the earth.

Wet, dejected, and dissatisfied, we headed for our respective vehicles. My idea had been good, but for some reason it had not developed as it should have. It wasn't my fault; it was the fault of the local rubes who didn't know that being asked about Boston in the middle of . . . well, never mind. I won't repeat myself. The important thing to remember is that it wasn't my fault.

We started the cars and prepared to leave Pemadumcook Lake. Bink's Trans Am was in the lead, followed by Chip, then me, and finally Jock. We moved slowly down the road, headlights penetrating the rain and darkness. The lake was on one side and ancient woodland on the other. We had allowed several car spaces between each vehicle for safety's sake.

We had gone a short distance when I heard Jock honk. In the rear view mirror I saw only the Range Rover's headlights. Keeping pace with the rest of us, he didn't appear to be in trouble.

Suddenly something appeared on my left, moving past me. My fists tightened reflexively on the steering wheel. A motorcyclist. I glanced over but because of the rain and

dark couldn't see him well. He—or perhaps she—seemed to be dressed in black. Doubtless Jock had honked because of the biker, perhaps to alert me or because the biker tried to cut between our cars. So far, though, the biker wasn't causing me any problems.

Finally he got beyond me and began to approach Chip's red Nissan. His motorcycle came into the illumination cast by my headlights before his body did: a big, sleek, black Harley-Davidson.

Suddenly I realized that the bike's lights were off. The idiot! Riding through a dark storm without lights! What had this guy been ingesting?

Then I noticed that the rider held a helmet under his left arm. A spare? Or was he riding bareheaded? His head hadn't come into view yet. Only his dark jeans and black leather jacket.

Maybe Jock had honked to wake the guy up. No lights; maybe no helmet. Yes, that was probably why Jock—

I gasped.

The body came into full view and—no head!

Or had I seen what I thought I saw? The biker's upper body had been in my lights only momentarily before he disappeared beside the Nissan.

I decided that I hadn't seen what I thought I'd seen, although my heart continued to pound. All this Peter Rugg nonsense! I'd spooked myself.

I chuckled.

Ahead I saw Chip's car swerve at about the same time I believed the

motorcyclist would have pulled ahead of him. Had Chip seen what I'd originally thought I'd seen? And reacted by swerving? No. Surely it was for some other reason.

Minutes later Chip's Nissan slowed and began pulling over. I understood why when I saw that Bink's Trans Am had also slowed and begun to pull over. Chip was following Bink's lead, and naturally I followed Chip's and Jock followed mine.

Once parked along the roadside, we climbed out into the storm. Earlier the kids except Kip had stayed in the vehicles to keep out of the rain, but now they came out with their older brothers, sticking close by them, their eyes wide and nervous with fright.

"Did you see it?" demanded Bink. "Did all of you see it?"

"I almost wrecked my dad's car," said Chip with a tremor in his voice. "I couldn't believe it. No head! No head at all!"

"Perhaps we just thought so," I said, pursuing my earlier deduction. "Perhaps he was wearing a black hat or—"

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Chip with uncharacteristic anger. "I know what I saw."

"He pulled in front of me after he passed," said Bink. "I had a clear view of him for several seconds. There was nothing—and I mean nothing—on his shoulders. He had no head. Period. No head. None. Not unless . . . not unless it was in that helmet he was carrying under his arm."

"Should we report it to the police?" asked Kip.

"Oh, definitely," said Jock sarcastically. "Officers, we want to report that we saw a headless motorcycle rider while we were driving home from Pemadumcook Lake after trying to scare the wits out of local rubes by pretending to be Peter Rugg. Yes, they'd love that. Peter Rugg would reach Boston before we heard the end of it."

"So what should we do?" I asked.

"Go home," said Bink. "We get back in our cars and go home just the way we'd planned."

"What if we see the headless biker again?" asked Kip.

Bink swallowed. "If he's entitled to it, we yield him the right-of-way. Otherwise we just keep going."

There was some resolve in his words. We all tried to be as resolute mentally as Bink was verbally, but I don't think even Bink succeeded. For half a minute none of us moved. We stood there in the rain staring at one another.

Finally Bink uttered an obscenity and started back toward his Trans Am, his little sister following so closely that she was almost stepping on his heels. Jock turned back to the Range Rover, his brothers and Skip Gates following close behind. Chip looked at me, shook his head, muttered something under his breath ("I wish we hadn't begun this" or "I wish we had a gun with us") and walked back to his car.

We resumed our journey. The trip back seemed much longer than the trip up. I remained on edge—half expecting the headless biker to reappear—until we reached I-95. Even then, whenever our caravan was alone on the highway I became ap-

prehensive. The remainder of the journey proved uneventful, however. We arrived in Camden safe and sound.

We agreed to keep what had happened a secret. I suspected that the little kids wouldn't be able to keep quiet for long, but I was mistaken. Everybody kept silent. We didn't even tell Win the full story, only said that the Mainers had surprised us by going indoors during the storm and the few we had encountered had been too dumb to realize that someone that far north shouldn't be asking directions to Boston.

Win apparently didn't hear the Portland radio broadcast that mentioned some mischievous behavior in central Maine. Several people had reported seeing a headless motorcycle rider. He was first spotted by an elderly couple driving past Pemadumcook Lake, later by drivers on I-95, and still later between Bangor and Ellsworth. But there was a logical explanation. Seems that people near Millinocket were laughing about how some young sports had come up from the seaboard and tried to spook them by dressing in old rags and asking directions to Boston. Obviously, said the announcer, the motorcyclist had rigged his jacket so that it covered his head. Equally obvious to the announcer was the fact that the motorcyclist and the sports who drove around asking directions to Boston were all part of the same group.

Chip was so upset by the broad-

cast that he wanted to phone the station, but we talked him out of it. Nobody would ever believe us. We alone knew the truth.

I try not to think about it. It's easier now than it was that August. Then I thought about it during every waking moment. I even had a nightmare about the headless motorcyclist. It didn't help that I accompanied Win and his parents when they drove up to Bar Harbor to say goodbye to their friends before everybody headed south at summer's end. I thought the trip would take my mind off what I'd seen. Instead it shook me worse than ever. The Bar Harbor family's teenage daughter had a black Harley-Davidson exactly like the one we'd seen at Pemadumcook Lake. When I saw it, I almost fainted.

"Are you all right?" asked the girl.

It was doubly embarrassing because she wasn't bad looking. Not my type, really, because I don't care for girls who wear glasses, but she was pretty.

Win was definitely attracted to her, and I could see that the feeling was reciprocated.

"Sure, I'm fine," I said. "It's just that I had a bad experience with a black motorcycle recently."

She and Win smiled at each other, probably amused that any sort of "experience" with a black motorcycle would cause somebody to grow faint at the sight of one. But of course they didn't know the full story.

FICTION

PIGEON DROP

Andrew Vachss



“What?” The speaker’s voice was hard-cored . . . but its edges were brittle.

“Put Carlos on.”

“Who wants him?”

“This whole conversation’s not going past forty-five seconds, pal. You want to spend it playing games?”

A muttered course cushioned the sound of a palm slapped over the receiver.

“Where, when, and how much?” Carlos didn’t bother with the preliminaries—he knew his voice would be recognized instantly. And he knew the man he was speaking to would do as he promised—hang up when the trace-time had run.

“Tonight, oh two hundred hours. The Paradise Motel on Twenty-fifth,” the man answered. “Go around to the service entrance in the back—where the supply trucks pull in. Two fifty. Small bills, no sequence, no chemicals, and no bang in the suitcase.”

“Be reasonable, hombre. It is two P.M. now. Twelve hours, it is not very much. And that is a bad neighborhood you picked. I need more time.”

“Come alone, Carlos.”

A sad-sounding sigh . . . of reluctant acquiescence.

“You too, Cross.”

The man called Cross hit the off switch on the cellular phone thinking it was typical of an amateur to make sure he got the other guy’s name on the tape. In case the *federales* were listening.

If he’d had a sense of humor, Cross would have chuckled at that. Amateurs never got it. And the eas-

iest kind of amateurs were those who thought being a pro at one thing gave them the same status at another—like a dentist doing his own taxes. Carlos was near the top of a dope-smuggling pyramid, but he didn’t know how to play *this* game.

Otherwise he would have known: When you’re in a war zone, it’s never the name that matters—it’s the address.

And Cross was already at the address. From his vantage point in the ground-floor room, he had a clear view of the service entrance in the back.

“You are really so sure he will do it?” A woman’s voice, coming from the darkness in the back of the small, narrow room.

“Which? Bring the baby or bring the money?”

“The *baby*. What do I care about your money? You already *got* plenty of money. My husband’s money, yes? Why did you not just make the trade, like you told us you would?”

“Carlos knows me,” Cross patiently told the woman. “*Thinks* he knows me, anyway. He took your baby to make you pay, right? What your husband owed him?”

“I do not know my husband’s business,” the woman’s voice said.

“Sure,” Cross replied, nothing in his voice. “Anyway, Carlos knows the risk I took to hijack his shipment. He knows I have to get paid. I’m charging him maybe a tenth of what it’s worth. Plus the baby. That would make sense to him. If I traded a couple of million dollars’ worth of pure for the baby, he wouldn’t like the math. You can’t be paying me

that much—that's the way he'd figure it."

"How could he know how much we would pay for our own baby? I would pay anything to—"

"Yeah, you might. But your husband, he must have drawn the line somewhere short of that."

"I do not know what you mean."

"Yeah, you do. This was always about money. You don't know your husband's business—sure, whatever you say. You think maybe he's selling used cars, that's what pays for that mansion you live in? All those servants? Fancy cars? Jewelry? Your husband, he's not so slick, figuring Carlos for just another smuggler. Telling him the powder was no good—that he wouldn't pay."

"I don't know any—"

"I guess your husband figured he had enough horsepower in case Carlos squawked. That joint you live in, it's pretty well protected. Your husband had it all figured—except for the nanny you hired a few months ago."

"Ah, Carmelita. *Put a!* I thought he hired her for his . . . pleasure. Bringing her into my own home, right in front of my eyes. But I could do nothing. You don't understand how—"

"It makes no difference to me," Cross said. "It wasn't about sex anyway. You found that out, right?"

"You weren't there. You don't know what she—"

"Sure I know what she did. She took your baby. Right under your nose. You were so busy watching to make sure she didn't get it on with your husband that you let down your guard as soon as he was out of

the house. Pretty smooth, wasn't it? FedEx guy comes to the front door with a package. Carmelita goes to answer it, has the baby in her arms. You're not paying any attention—"

"—I wasn't even downstairs. I was in the—"

"—whatever," Cross cut her off. "She hands the baby to the phony FedEx guy, and he walks right off with him, right past the guards, the baby in his pouch. By the time you wake up . . ."

"From that poison she put in my coffee!"

"Yeah, I guess it would have been harder for her to knock you out if you hadn't used her as your personal maid as well as the baby's nurse."

"I was—"

"—trying to humiliate her. You couldn't get her fired, but you sure could break her chops. Just like Carlos figured you would. He's been ahead of you all since the beginning."

"You know everything, don't you?" the woman said, venom-laced bitterness in her voice.

"I know the same as you do," the man called Cross said to her. "Only difference is, I don't close my eyes to it."

The black Corvette pulled into the drive-up area behind the motel at one fifty-nine A.M. It sat idling, no sign of life visible inside.

Less than a minute later a smog-colored four-door sedan of no particular make entered the same area, aimed windshield-to-windshield at the black coupe.

The cars watched each other like

pit dogs preparing to fight. The Corvette's headlights were shrouded, the sedan's amber running lights were on.

A man left the anonymous car and walked toward the Corvette. He was carrying a scuffed brown leather suitcase.

The door to the Corvette opened. Another man stepped out, a bundle wrapped in a pale blue blanket held in one arm.

"Cross," the man with the blanket said.

"Time to test," Cross replied.

"You think this ain't a real baby?" Carlos asked. "Look." He gently pulled the blanket away from where it was tucked. "See for yourself."

"That's not the test," Cross said. "All I see is a baby. Could be *any* baby, right? All you see is a suitcase. You open it, it looks like your powder—but how you gonna know for sure?"

"I got—"

"Yeah, you got the stuff to test it with, I know. But it could take you a few minutes, do all that. And you gotta go into your car to do it, too. Right?"

"Of course. Do you think I can—"

"Don't get excited," Cross said softly. "We're both worried the other's pulling a switch, right? The old pigeon drop. An envelope stuffed full of money right there on the sidewalk. The mark spots it same time as the hustlers. They open it together, check it out. It's stuffed with cash. Big bills. No I.D. Finders keepers, right? Only thing is, you gotta wait thirty days, see if anyone claims it, that's the law. And may-

be there's a reward, who knows? Now, the mark don't trust the hustlers—and the hustlers act like they don't trust the mark. So they finally decide to let the mark hold the envelope, but he first has to go to his bank, take out a couple of thousand, and give it to the hustlers for 'security.' The mark figures, what can he lose? Or maybe he's planning to just vanish with the cash. Doesn't matter. When he gets to a safe place and opens the envelope, he finds it's full of blank paper."

"I know how it works," Carlos said impatiently. "So how do we do this without one of us leaving?"

"We exchange packages," Cross told him. "I take the kid. A short ride. Make sure I got the real thing. You take the powder, sit in your car, make sure you got the real thing, too. Fair enough?"

"How do I know you won't just disappear? Leave me with a whole suitcase full of cut?"

"I'll stay right here. I'll put the baby in the car, turn around, and wait right here. You still got my money, right? I haven't asked you for it. Make sure your powder's good, *then* pay me, how's that?"

"The baby is my trump card, hombre. Not the money. How about I give you the money and I keep the baby while I check the powder?"

"No good. You can check the powder yourself, see if the test tube turns blue. I can't check the baby with no chemicals. And I got paid for the *baby*."

"Right, I give up the baby, go back to my car. Let's say the powder's good. Probably is good—I know your

crew doesn't deal—what else *could* you do with it but sell it back to me? So I check it out, come back to give you your money, get out of the car, and you smoke me right here. You called this spot—you probably got people all around.”

“Sure,” Cross told him softly. “But if that’s all I wanted, your cash and the powder, I could’ve done it already.” He put the suitcase on the ground. Instantly, a red dot blossomed on Carlos’ white leather jacket, right over his heart. “Laser sight,” Cross said. “Anytime I wanted, see? That’s not what this is. Lorgano didn’t hire me to hit you—he just wants the baby back.”

“The baby? He don’t care nothing about the baby. He is no kind of man. That is his own child, his own son. And all I wanted was what he owes us. What does he do? He hires you. What could you be paid for a job like this? Not the money he owes us. Much less. He is a clever man, I give him that. This way, he cannot lose. You get the baby back, he’s a little lighter in the pocket, but he still has my product and he has not paid for it. If you fail, what has he lost?”

“The baby—”

“Don’t insult me,” Carlos said. “You know I never return the baby without *all* the money. And you know Lorgano will not *pay* all the money—that’s why he hires you. So you hijack another of my shipments, go for the discount.”

“Nobody got hurt,” Cross said.

“Sure. Everyone knows your crew. I ain’t got no rookies working for me. They seen your people—you didn’t make no secret of it. Like you

could disguise Rhino and Princess anyway—Christ! They got the drop on my people. What was they gonna do then, shoot it out? And now I not only don’t get my money for the first shipment, I have to pay you for the second one.”

“That happens sometimes,” Cross shrugged.

“You know what this cost me, hombre? You think putting a woman inside his house to steal the baby was cheap? I had to go through Victor himself to set it up. A hundred grand just for that, for the plan and the woman. Another two and a half for you, tonight. This is a business. Business is supposed to make a profit. I never should have dealt with that slime Lorgano—he has no honor.”

“Here’s the way we’re gonna do it,” Cross said, unperturbed. “Give me the kid. Take the suitcase. Get in your car. Drive off, anywhere you want. Look through it, check it out, do whatever you need to do. When you know it’s pure, come back here with my money.”

“This is the real baby,” Carlos said. “And you know what, I believe you got the real powder there, too. So why should I come back with your cash?”

“You shouldn’t have snatched the baby,” Cross said quietly. “You’re right—he don’t give a damn about the kid. Only his wife does, and she don’t count. He *was* trying for a discount, just like you said. He didn’t set specs on how I should get the kid back, probably thought he was buying a hit for what he paid me. What you should have done, you should have snatched *him*. Then

you'd find out where your product is—and his money, too."

"*Bueno!* You tell me all this *now*. Besides, there's no way we get close enough to snatch him. It would be a suicide run. And my crew, it is all *familia*, you understand? Not soldiers I can just throw into the jungle, not give a rat's ass if they come back. You remember how that was, Cross?"

"I remember," Cross said. "We don't work for that country any more, you and me. Go look at your powder. Come back with my money. And then I'll solve your problem for you."

"How you gonna do that, *hombre?*"

"While you're checking out that powder, make a call. Call Victor. And ask him where he found the woman to put inside Lorgano's house."

Carlos nodded, as if thinking it through for himself. "Okay, I get it—this was you from the beginning, right? So what? No way you get another girl next to him—he won't go for that twice."

"In a couple of minutes," Cross said, soft-voiced, "you're gonna have the powder. Me, I'm gonna have the baby. I'm not going into his compound—he could decide the best way to clean the slate is to whack me soon as he has the kid. I'm gon-

na show the baby to his wife, not to him. And then *I'm gonna* hold the baby. So he'll have to meet me somewhere. Someplace open—like right here, understand?"

"*Sí*. How much?"

"He's got, what, three million of your money? Plus whatever this all cost you. What's it worth to get your hands on him, alone?"

"You tell me, *hombre*."

"You already owe me a quarter mil, right? Double it, and he's yours. C.O.D."

"It sounds good, Cross. But it doesn't sound like you. Lorgano, he will know who set him up. And he still has plenty of firepower."

"Yeah, I know. His crew, it's not like yours. They're all mercs. They work for the money. They wouldn't do anything just for revenge. It would just be Lorgano."

"So? He could just hire some new ..."

"You remember a kid named Juan? He was with you, right? Until he got smoked doing a delivery. You lost that shipment, too, right?"

"Yes, Juanito was my sister's oldest son. But that was—"

"That was Lorgano," Cross said. "He had the kid hit. Another shipment he didn't pay for."

Carlos' face hardened. He handed the baby to Cross. "C.O.D.," he said.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



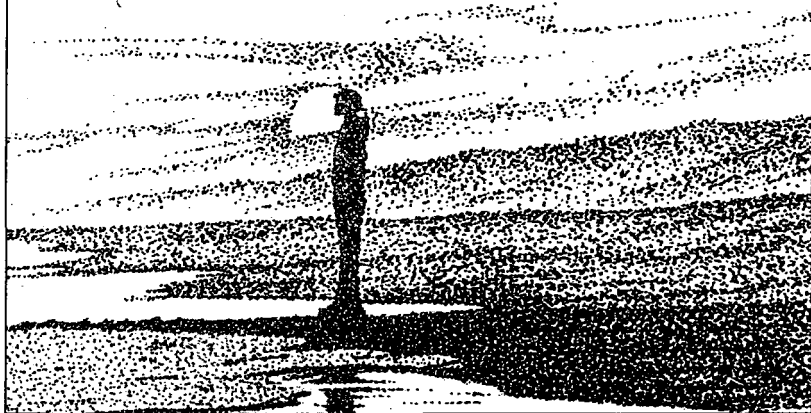
Chuck Eaton Photography/The Image Factory

Eskimos touch noses. These folks . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest
will be found on page 141.

TARA'S HEART

D. A. McGuire



He'd heard it described many ways. Thundering. Rolling. Pounding. Even booming.

What about whispering? he thought. As the surf slides back into the sea, the whispering rush of water after the roar?

No. Not quite right. Too gentle, and not an apt description for this surf. This surf was a constant thud, like a bad headache centered just behind the eyes.

It hadn't gone right, not at all as he'd expected, or hoped. But what

had he expected, anyhow? Had he overreached himself, refused to believe that maybe this relationship, like the one he'd so briefly enjoyed with the boy's mother, was ended, too? He should have known from the start, from the moment he'd stood on Emily Sawyer's doorstep, making his request, how pitiful, how small he must have looked.

"... so I was wondering, Em ... Emily, if maybe Herbie might want to spend a weekend, the long weekend, Columbus Day, out in West-fleet, do a little surf-casting, maybe

some trail-biking. Got some great trails out there, miles through the marshes and dunes, kind of pretty."

Her eyes, so wide and blue, had stared right through him. She'd been surprised to see him standing there, no doubt about it, though she concealed it pretty well. But hadn't it been she, after all, who had said (when? seven, eight weeks ago?), "I want you and Herbie to remain friends, Jake. Just because you and I are through doesn't mean you need to break off your relationship with him. He looks up to you."

So when Emily had just nodded and said, "Come on in, Jake. Ask him yourself," well, that had been surprising, too, though walking into the house he'd helped her buy—and keep up the payments on with the job he'd helped her get—and looking around at the work—painting, papering, a new set of kitchen cabinets—all of which he'd helped her do, put up, and build, had given him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Still, he got over it. As a cop he'd learned to disguise his emotions. In fact he'd been almost jolly as he spoke to Herbie, whose face was as sober, as long, as his mother's. And after making his offer, Jake had been surprised when Herbie had answered with, "Sure, Jake. Got nothing else to do that weekend anyhow. It'll free up Mom—" a scathing glance at his mother—"so she can spend more time with Paul. Hey, won't it, Mom?"

Paul. The new man in Emily Sawyer's life. Jake had felt so uncomfortable, shifting his weight from foot to foot. It was then that he

began to believe Herbie's resentment wasn't so much a reflection of how he felt about Jake but of how he felt about his mother.

So Jake would have a weekend to sort that out with Herbie, deciding, among other things, whether his relationship with the fourteen-year-old boy was indeed destined to end here and now or whether any part of it might continue. Damn, he thought as the surf thudded, not against the long swatch of dark beach before him but behind his eyes, in the center of his brain. The sun was setting behind him, not on the sea itself—he was facing east—but as if it were setting on all he held important, precious, nearly sacred between himself and the boy.

Jake had kids. He'd tried to convince himself that he didn't need this fourteen-year-old to be some kind of surrogate son. But Jake seldom saw his two grown sons; they'd gone to live in Lynn, north of Boston, with their mother. Their visits to him were occasional things, duty visits, around the time of his birthday or Father's Day if he was lucky.

There were cards at Christmas, gift certificates to restaurants and nationwide chains. Nothing personal. No feeling in them at all.

But with Herbie there had been something else, a kinship he'd never felt with his own children except when his boys had been very small, climbing over his knees and into his lap, making no judgment calls on him, his job, or the way he had treated—miserably—their mother. With Emily Sawyer and her son Herbie he'd felt he'd been given a second chance.

Now he'd lost that chance and damned if he understood why.

He glanced back at the trailer parked in the wooded area behind the marsh. This was private land, bordering the National Seashore. Its owner, however, had been more than grateful for Jake's intervention in a little personal matter, telling Jake he could set down here anywhere, anytime, for a little fishing, a little relaxation.

That had been six years ago, but the offer was still open when Jake had called to inquire about it.

Now he looked back at the lights in the trailer, wondering if the boy were still working on that damned crossword puzzle. He hadn't wanted to take a walk on the beach with Jake, hadn't wanted to go into the nearest town for a movie, hadn't wanted to play cards or cribbage (which he played well enough to beat Jake three times out of five), hadn't wanted to watch television on the small portable Jake had brought along.

Hadn't wanted to do anything at all but work the crosswords in a small paperback he'd found in the trailer's storage compartment.

Jake shut his eyes tight, seeing the boy still sitting there in a molded plastic chair, hunched over the book, saying nothing, asking nothing. Jake understood this much: Herbie had wanted nothing this trip, no conversation, no exchanges that even bordered on any kind of feeling or friendship.

So why had he agreed to the trip? So he could make that one cutting remark to his mother? Was all this misery worth that one comment?

Maybe so, because Jake knew that's all Emily would think about the entire weekend no matter what she did or didn't do with her new beau, Paul the fireman.

Jake had tried. Minutes ago, standing in the doorway of the trailer, he'd mentioned that "some people, you know, can't stand the sound of the surf."

Herbie replied, not even lifting his head from the puzzle, "Guess I'm not one of them."

He turned again, wondering how long he'd stood there watching the waves wash in and out, letting the thud of the surf pound against his nerves, his eyes, his brain. An hour? Had he been standing there that long?

Maybe longer because when he turned to look at the trailer a final time, the lights were all out.

At first he wasn't sure what he was hearing, or even if he was awake yet. Were they voices? High, excited voices? Look out? Was someone saying, "Look out! Oh no!—Jimmy, be careful!"

Then other voices, rising in a mixed and confused chorus. He couldn't make them out, and sitting up in the small cramped space, careful not to hit his head—the top bunk was just an inch above him—he was puzzled for a moment.

He heard the boy move restlessly overhead just as the voices grew louder: "Look out!" "Watch that tail!" "No! No!" "Jimmy, this way!"

Not one voice but many voices. And not one set of running footsteps but many.

Jake pulled his jeans on, grabbed

his windbreaker and his sneakers, threw open the door of the trailer. The sun was just coming up, an orange bowl on the water, and all along the beach were shapes, at first blurred, that slowly sorted out into figures: men, women, rushing back and forth into and out of the surf. And with them another series of shapes—long, low, black, huge—took form as well.

Suddenly Jake knew what he was looking at.

He rushed back into the trailer and reached into the top bunk.

"Wake up, Herbie, get dressed. Whales are beaching themselves in the surf."

He didn't think he'd ever worked so hard, so physically hard, in the cold. They hadn't let him and Herbie come into the surf with them, this young cadre of men and women who were so desperately intent on pushing back to sea as many pilot whales as possible. But it was October and the water was cold and the waves high, strong, unremitting. He'd watched as the group had to give up on one, a cow that had splashed and flailed herself too far up the beach to push back. A smaller whale, perhaps her calf, was hugging her side; the rescuers worked on it instead but then gave up. How could the calf return to the sea without its mother?

It was heartbreaking to watch as the sun came up before them, lighting the great black bodies one by one along the shore of Tanaman Beach. The best Herbie and he could offer was to carry buckets of water from the surf to the beached

whales, keeping them wet as the cool morning breeze licked the moisture from their backs, threatening to dry them. The tide had turned, was going out, and slowly, one after another, the great beasts were being left stranded, moving their flukes and tails in . . . in what, Jake had wondered. Confusion? Despair? Hopelessness? Whatever had brought one whale, perhaps their leader, to this agonizing destiny had brought them all. The rescuers, most of them clad in wet-suits, had managed to push a half dozen off, mostly the smaller ones. But there were still old cows and some calves up and down the shoreline, each with its little party of humans stroking the huge bodies, wetting them down.

There were other whales behind them, too, caught in the marsh. When the tide finally went out, there was a stretch of high sand between the shore and the marsh. Several whales were up there, half-submerged in waterfilled ditches but stranded nonetheless. They'd heard that another pair, a cow and an immature male, had made it to a small salt pond farther up the beach. A group of high school kids who'd been camping at the National Seashore were watching over them.

At nearly noon the tides shifted again. Wetting down their whale—their whale. Don't name it, Herbie, Jake had said. Don't name it.

But Herbie had anyhow: Franklin. Franklin, a male calf, separated from its mother, and which one was she anyhow? Was she still in the water? Or would she be one of the first to be euthanized?

Jake had heard the talk between two of the rescuers and a veterinarian and his assistant. Some of the biggest animals, lying on the beach for so long, were becoming dehydrated. The weight of their own bulk was crushing their internal organs. Flippers were already starting to die, the tissue becoming necrotic. Their talk contained so little of hope that Jake wondered briefly what effect it would have on Herbie. Though the boy was loyal to the end and watched in silence when, slightly after noon, the vets got ready to put the large, gentle animals to sleep. Such a terrible euphemism, Jake thought.

But it was explained to the volunteers that even those they could push back now—the biggest ones, that is—would probably drown. Euthanasia was kinder, more humane.

Jake and Herbie watched one group of local volunteers arguing bitterly with the veterinarians, but the volunteers relented and, stroking their charge, a large, listless cow, stayed with her as she was euthanized.

They came for Franklin. For a moment Jake just watched, wondering how and when to intervene. What did he need to do to make this all right for Herbie? They had stayed with the calf for six hours now, pouring buckets of water over him, talking to him, touching him. How long does it take to bond with a whale? Jake had never thought he'd have to answer that question, but now he knew the answer: minutes. Just minutes.

Then he heard one of the men in charge say, "We're taking this one

to the aquarium. Get the front-end loader down here."

"Sad scene," Jake said softly, following the woman down to the surf. She was dressed in a black wetsuit with white and green stripes on the arms and legs.

"Yeah, thanks," was her offhand response. "We can always use the help."

She had her back to him, was leaning over to wash the sand from her hands. Even though it was early October, the morning was bright and warm, and the water, here where it was shallow, was warm as well. She had boots on, was standing in ankle-deep water, and, Jake realized suddenly, was refusing to look at him.

Behind him there were excited shouts, sounds of a news crew, children's voices. They'd come to take Franklin away a few minutes ago. Herbie was up in the nearest parking lot watching as they loaded the baby whale into a white semi-trailer truck with the words MID-CAPE AQUARIUM painted on the side.

It had given Jake the opportunity to come down to the shore, single her out, confront her alone. Which, strangely enough, was not something he wanted to do. Neither was this: to say her name.

He watched her shoulders move, the strong arms tense up, her neck twist, then pause. So he said her name again. "I know it's you. Don't worry, no one can hear us."

"I think maybe, mister," she said, trying quite hard to be casual but distant, and yet not unfriendly, "you've got me mixed up with some-

one else. My name is—" Then she said a different name.

"Your hair's different," he said, and it was, no longer shoulder-length, dark brown. She'd cut it, curled it, and dyed it an unbecoming shade of golden-red. The roots were black. It was a thin disguise, though, for anyone who knew her—or had known her. "But you're she. You got away, didn't you? Hell, I know you did, but I never expected to find you here. Why didn't you leave the Cape?"

She turned and walked out of the surf. "I thought I told you I came home because I had to. How could you have forgotten that?"

"You're quiet," Herbie said, studying the book on the table before him. They had visited the gift shop at the aquarium although it was closed for the season. The aquarium director, impressed with Herbie's devotion to the young calf now christened Franklin (now swimming busily around the largest tank at the facility), had given Herbie *Whales of New England Waters* as a thank-you.

"You're telling me *I'm* quiet?" Jake responded. "You haven't said two words to me this whole weekend."

"Not much to say, Jake." Herbie raised his head, squinted as though Jake were hard to see. "You went off to talk to some lady down at the beach. I saw you. After they loaded up Franklin and took him away."

Jake stared at the boy over his coffee mug, waiting. Suddenly this rented trailer felt incredibly small.

"She didn't like talking to you, I

could see that even from a distance. You made her—" Herbie glanced down at the book on the table "—uncomfortable."

"And how do you know that?" Jake asked.

The boy shook his head. His hair was too long now; it fell into his eyes. "I don't know. Body language or something. Who is she?"

"An old girlfriend—I make a lot of my old girlfriends uncomfortable, I guess."

"Oh." Herbie bent his head over the book again.

It was the end of a long day.

The weeks afterward turned into fall, with more chill in the morning and late afternoon air. Routine business caught up with Jake, and though he hadn't forgotten whom he'd seen on the beach that day, he put it out of his mind. It wasn't important at the moment, though he realized indifference gave her plenty of time to disappear.

The Cape this time. Australia next perhaps, or Alaska or Tahiti.

Truth of the matter was, Jake Valari had other things to puzzle over, worry about. Late at night, a drink in one hand, cigarette in another, he would remember how things had been when he was dating Emily Sawyer. Back then the nights had had a warm feeling about them, even in the dampest weather; the coldest nights. The boy, his questions, his curiosity, had kept Jake feeling alive and aware of the events and possibilities all around him.

As for Herbie's mother, Emily

Sawyer had made Jake feel alive in quite a different way. He'd actually laughed with her, shared his ideas and secrets, his noblest ambition, to write a historical novel set on Cape Cod. She had never laughed at his dreams, had always encouraged him.

He hadn't seen Herbie since the weekend of the pilot whales. And though he'd made a few trips to the aquarium to check on Franklin and his cohort, a calf named Wilson who had also been saved, he made no effort to seek out Herbie or his mother. Most nights, like this one, he spent at home alone, reviewing cases, reading, watching television, and occasionally thinking about the woman he'd spoken to in the surf that day, the woman who was supposed to have died a year ago.

By her own hand, though Jake had known otherwise.

Still, even he was surprised that it was on one of those empty, lonely nights, three weeks after Columbus Day, when he got the call.

"You want me to help you find—" Jake paused, studied the woman sitting at the table across from him. He'd agreed to meet her here, at a small, year-round cafe located right off the canal. Now he was wondering why he had. "Your roommate?"

She nodded, curls of red-gold hair bobbing on her head. She wasn't unattractive this way; it was just that he could never envision the sober, serious girl he'd known—who'd grown up to become who and what she had—with this kind of look. It was too light, too carefree. The flowered denim shirt, the white

jeans and pink sweater, the soft, low-cut shoes. The girl and notorious woman he'd known had had an exterior as tough and as unyielding as a rhino's hide. This was a different woman.

He thought he could get used to it, though. It seemed experimental, as if she were going through a series of incarnations and didn't know which one was right yet.

"And the Westfleet police?"

"Bunch of hicks, sergeant," she snapped, playing with the wooden bracelet dangling on her left wrist. "Don't know their—" She finished with a quaint saying Jake had heard more than once.

"How long has she been missing?"

She studied him a moment before answering. They had met with mutual suspicion and distrust and, like a fencing couple, moved and parried around each other, each careful not to reveal any weakness. But in truth it was all a bluff, considering that only one of them had very much to lose.

And it wasn't him.

She expelled a huge sigh. "Didn't come home last night."

Jake glanced at his watch; nine A.M. Sunday morning. "When was she expected?"

"Midnight. She never comes in later." Her voice betrayed her, grew swift and anxious. Her body, too, as she leaned across the table toward him, pushing aside her coffee, an untouched bagel. "She works at the Lonely Harp, the bar on the wharf at Westfleet, you know the one? She didn't come home. She gets off at eleven, and she just didn't show.

She's a sweet kid, an innocent girl, and I'm scared to death for her."

Jake glanced down at the photograph in front of him. A thin girl, looked barely nineteen or twenty. Big eyes, pale, sculpted face with high cheekbones. Like one of those girls you might see in a teenage fashion magazine or walking the catwalk on some cable fashion show. Not unattractive but definitely not his type either.

"Local police can't do anything," he said. "Not for—"

"Twenty-four hours. I know," she snapped, slumping back in the booth.

"Yeah, you know—" He nearly said her name, said instead, "But you didn't go to the police, did you?"

"Hell, who do I think I am," she snarled, "that you'd want to help me? I scout you out, some rogue cop who should have turned me in weeks ago—" She moved to rise, slamming down a few dollars for her bill. "By the way, how's the kid doing, and his pet whale? I hear he visits the aquarium almost every day to check it out."

Jake Valari was a big man, a burly man, but he'd never been a slow man or one to miss even the slightest hint of a threat. His hand swung out, gripping her arm so quickly she barely had time to react.

Though she was no lightweight, either. It had been partly her build, her strong back, shoulders, and arms, that had identified her to him that day, working alongside men twice her size, pushing pilot whales back into the surf.

Still, she froze. The small diner had barely a half a dozen cus-

tomers in it, but suddenly all of them were looking their way.

"Hell, Jake," she muttered, sliding back down into the seat. "What are you thinking—that I'd hurt that kid? You must think I'm one hell of a monster." She exhaled a long, slow breath. "I said that because..." His grip loosened, letting go. "... I visit myself, almost every day, to check on the calves. The most he and I do is say hi. I go about my business; he goes about his."

He held her stare for a moment, letting there be absolutely no doubt about who and what he was—and that in this and in anything yet to come between them he held the upper hand.

And waited for her to relent, to say, "Jake, I swear. I didn't mean that as a threat. Really."

"You answer my questions," he said, expression never changing, "and I'll see what I can do to help you find your roommate."

"Damn. Why do you need that?" she demanded.

They'd walked in silence for several minutes, side by side, down the roughly paved access road that ran the length of the canal. "Give me your license," he said again.

So she did, grudgingly, and they walked on, passing a lone biker, a woman walking a collie. The air coming off the canal was wet, cool, but not unpleasant. It was midday, almost fifty, a typical Indian Summer day.

"Melanie Wilkerson," he said, reading her name. "You stole someone's identity?"

"No, and . . ." A violent shake of her head. "Yes, but I'm not hurting anyone, Jake. Damn." She kicked a clod of dirt with her foot; the clod split apart and went flying.

"You want my help, you'll answer my questions first. If not, it's good-bye and good luck."

"Okay." She stopped, turned to face him, hands in her back pockets now. The cool canal air rustled and lifted the curls across her forehead. "Melanie Wilkerson." She nodded at the license. "Born 1962, killed with her family in 1964, Wisconsin, housefire. I got her birth certificate over the phone, an authorized copy straight from the town hall. So the Melanie who never was, who never grew up: that's me. I'm her. With her birth certificate I got a Social Security number and, with that, a license, passport, whatever I wanted. Credit cards, Jake, dozens. I have very good credit."

"They make it almost too easy, don't they?" he said sarcastically.

"That's who I am, that's who—to the whole world who knows me now—I've always been. I had that—" a nod at the piece of plastic in his hand—"four years before I had to use it."

"And now you're in Westfleet."

"Hell, Jake." She spun away from him, head thrown back in exasperation. "I never thought I'd stay on the Cape. What for? And risk running into someone—like you?" She turned back around. "But I . . . I ended up in Westfleet, and . . . damn, do you know how beautiful that part of the Cape is? They still have trees—huge trees, oaks and pines and even elms. It's all hills

and rocks out there, so the early settlers couldn't farm the land. They left it alone while the rest of Cape Cod was being cut down so farmers could plant their crops. Westfleet was a worthless tract of land tucked in the inner elbow of the Cape. Later—" she turned to stare down the canal, toward the train bridge—"winds blew away most of the topsoil. The Cape was no good for farming any more. It was ruined, took nearly two hundred years for it to come back. And most of it's not back, not the way it was, the way it still is in Westfleet."

This entire conversation was making her angry, uncomfortable.

"I saw a sign in a bar, help wanted, waitress. I applied, got the job, and stayed. I've worked at the animal shelter and as a veterinarian's assistant. I've done cataloguing in the local library and worked in a nursing home in the cafeteria. I keep busy and sane. In midsummer I got another job, housesitting, a beautiful place in the woods overlooking Tanaman Beach. Owner's a writer, decided to summer in Ireland."

"That why you were there that day pushing whales off the beach?"

"The vet I worked for called me. I don't work for him any more, but he liked me. I could help him with the big animals, the rough ones, the dogs the other girls were afraid of. I seem to have a way with animals."

"And this Tara—"

"Hart. Tara Hart. I met her at the vet's, she came in with a beagle hit by a car. A stray brought in by a stray is what they were. Probably some vacation dog left to fend for it-

self, and Tara—"The tension was too great suddenly. "Look, Jake, none of this is important, what is it that you help me find Tara. She's twenty-four, but she may as well be fourteen. She's never not come home. I'm worried about her."

"She might've come back while you were talking to me."

"My one extravagance." She lifted a slim portable phone out of her back pocket. "I left a message for her to call me when she got in."

"How long've you known her?"

"Met her in late July. She had a job waitressing, was having a hard time finding a place to stay. In summer even a single room can be hard to find, especially in Westfleet." The very qualities that had made Westfleet untenable for the first Cape settlers made it one of the prime vacation resorts for the rich and indulged three hundred years later. If any part of Cape Cod had remained pristine since the time of the Pilgrims, it was the town of Westfleet.

"So I said stay with me. Don't know why. I'm not the real hospitable type. Maybe I didn't like envisioning a long winter alone, in a big house."

"That the only reason?"

"Yes," she snapped. "She's not, I'm not, and what the hell if we were? She's still missing."

"She's got a boyfriend." He extended his hand to her, her license between his fingers.

She sighed again. "There's a guy she's been seeing, bartender at the Harp. Ben Rose. I can give you his address. He can be a little quick. They argued." Her large, dark eyes lifted to look at him.

"You know, Melanie," he said, very careful to use her new name, "there's a reason for waiting twenty-four hours. Most people show up within that time. We're talking about an adult, not a kid who has stayed out past curfew."

"But if something *has* happened to her, when's it most likely to happen?" she charged back. "Within those first twenty-four hours."

"You know what I think," he said softly. "I think you're far too concerned about this. I think most people would've waited a little longer."

"And your point?" she snapped.

"That there's more to this than you're telling me."

"Okay, okay." She was turning away from him, hands in her hair as though she'd like to pull her fingers back through it but, remembering that it was full of curls, stopped, shuddering. If this were a new incarnation, it was not one she had adapted to. "So I'll do it myself."

"She's been gone longer than you said?" he asked. No response. "The boyfriend—he can be kind of quick? That what you said? What about rough? You think he's done something?" Still no answer.

"Melanie, what about her things—her belongings? Are any of them missing? Did she have a car?"

Finally an answer: "She borrowed mine. It wasn't there this morning. Okay, okay, since yesterday morning. She's been gone two days. The first day, yesterday, I went down to the Harp and picked up my car. I asked around, talked to the other waitresses and the busboys and Ben. No one saw her after

eleven Friday night when her shift ended. Ben said she and he had had a fight and she left without him. A ton of people can testify to it, to the fight and her leaving. As for her things, everything's still at the house. All her clothes, anything she cared about. Her cat." Her eyes, the set of her face, her entire body were defiant as she looked at him. "The cat was a stray, but she loves it. She'd never leave it."

"If you want me to help, ask around, see what I can do, you've got to be one hundred percent truthful with me. For starters, this isn't my jurisdiction, and you know it."

"But you're a cop. You know how to do things that I can't, and I don't trust—" Her face dropped.

"The Westfleet police. Why? What have they done?"

"I told you, they're just a bunch of incompetent hicks. They deal with traffic violations and give out parking tickets and get paid extra detail for working houseparties all summer. They wouldn't know the first thing about finding someone."

He stared at her, waiting. She stared back, but he was winning.

"Listen to me," he said carefully. "Because even if we—" he let the word sink in—"smalltown cops are nothing but a bunch of hicks, we have access to computers, nationwide databanks . . ." Now he just let it hang and returned her defiant stare.

"No." She shook her head willfully. "You don't think I've covered my tracks better than that? That's not it at all. They do any research on me, they'll find that Melanie Wilkerson survived that housefire,

was taken by an aunt to a small town in South Dakota. They'll even find my school records."

"Records you planted? How did you manage that?"

"You'd be surprised what you can manage in this day and age with a computer and a talented hacker."

"So why won't you go to the Westfleet police?"

"Because the police chief is Ben Rose. His nephew by the same name is Tara's boyfriend. If Ben did . . ." She paused to catch her breath, wrap her arms around her middle. "If he did anything to her, I'll kill him, and don't doubt it. But I'm not going to get any help from his doting uncle, now am I? He wants to get Ben on the force full-time. Ben's just working at the Harp until an opening comes up."

It was an added complication—a huge one.

"You're going to have to report her missing, Melanie," Jake said, watching her reaction. "I'll ask around, nothing official. Manameset, Westfleet, they're a long way apart, and I don't think I know any guys on that force. There are probably no more than seven, eight officers. Just the same, someone's apt to know me. So I won't identify myself as anything more than a concerned friend. But we're both going to need to work through the local police. It's the only way I can do this."

"A concerned friend?" she threw back at him haughtily, her face tightening up; then suddenly it relaxed with amusement. "Whose friend, Jake? Tara's? Or mine?"

Reaching into his back pocket,

he pulled out the notepad he kept there. "I'm going to need more information about Tara. More description. What she likes to do. What she was wearing."

She turned away from him, arms folded over her chest, and faced north, staring in the direction of the Bourne Bridge, its metallic upper structure just visible through the leafless trees. Suddenly, just as she sighed, it was time for his final move: "And one more thing, Melanie," he said. "You're going to owe me when this is over." She whipped around scowling as he added, "Big."

He left the last address on the pad, turning the car off the road and into the shade of some beautiful, gnarled locust trees, their branches heavy with long purple beanpods. Melanie was right; the town was beautiful, full of winding roads and hills and magnificent houses. They seemed to appear out of nowhere, nestled tightly between grand oaks and shaggy-limbed willow trees. Even in the chill of late October with the wind rising off the nearby beaches, there was an other-world elegance to the place. You could set one of those mystical computer games in a spot like this, Jake thought, and half the world would think it a fictional place.

What wasn't fictional was the meager information he had gotten from three women, waitresses who worked with Tara Hart, and four teenage busboys. He'd lied to each of them, pretending to be no more than a "family friend," eager to locate Tara, to "see how she's doing."

Only one had been suspicious at first, a fiftyish waitress with wiry blonde hair. But after he'd made a few jokes and taken her to lunch at the only classy restaurant in town, she opened up. Amazing what a few drinks, a little good food, will do to some people, he thought.

"Nah, saw her go off Friday night alone. But I saw Ben watching her. You know Ben, her boyfriend." She'd slopped ketchup all over her garlic baked potatoes and mashed the pulp around inside the potato skin.

"Ben?"

"Ben Rose. Uncle's the police chief in town. I know Ben—old Ben—from way back. He and I were an item once, but hey—" A shrug and another dose of ketchup. "Ed Rose, young Ben's daddy, dies, and suddenly old Ben, his whole life is this kid, this nephew of his. Sends him to school in Boston. Wants him to be a hotshot lawyer, but young Ben, he only likes to party, you know how I mean?" She batted her bloodshot eyes at Jake. Jake smiled, signaled for another round of drinks. "So old Ben gets young Ben a job at the Harp, tells him to bide his time, just wait, he'll get the kid on the force. Small town nepo . . . whatever . . . at its worst, don't you think?"

"Nepotism," Jake intoned, more to himself than her. "And young Ben, he's qualified?" Her red-rimmed eyes became confused. "To be a police officer?"

"Oh yeah, guess he studied criminal law at college but was a lousy student. Went to the state police academy, too. Old Ben pulled a few strings, knew a few people here and there, state reps, senators, you know

—hey, they all spend their summers out here. If not in Westfleet, then over in Dennis or Chatham.”

“And I suppose old Ben, he’s not above—” Jake shrugged off-handedly “—doing them a few favors? Small stuff, fixing parking tickets, maybe citations for speeding?”

But the woman’s mind was somewhere else. “Hyannis, even. Heck, I’d love to live in Hyannis.”

“Nice town,” he’d agreed.

He flipped through the notepad to see if he’d missed something. It was getting late, Sunday afternoon; he wondered whether he should contact Melanie, see if she’d reported Tara Hart missing as he’d told her to do.

Because that was something he definitely could not do. Bad enough that he was doing what he was, even though technically he was just asking around, something anyone had a right to do. Looking for a friend—of a friend.

But he’d been smart, saved the best, or the worst, for last. Ben Rose was working at the Lonely Harp right now.

“We close early on Sundays, Pop,” the bartender told Jake as he walked in. He was wiping the mahogany bar down with what looked like a particularly dirty rag. “Just breakfast and lunch. Bar stays open to five. It’s a slow time of year.”

Jake looked into the small dining room. Only four or five people were there. One tired-looking waitress was hauling heavy platters around. A busboy was noisily filling a dishpan with glasses and cutlery.

“Not here to eat or drink,” Jake said, walking to the bar, confronting the man.

Too old was his immediate impression. Long past thirty. This wasn’t Ben Rose, Tara’s “quick” boyfriend.

But within moments—and with the swift departure of a twenty dollar bill—Jake knew right where Ben Rose was.

For a moment it seemed strange to be back there, with the deep blue of the darkening sky resting against the water beyond. So Jake stood a moment, hands on his hips, and watched as the lone figure on the beach slowly turned and saw him.

No whales this night. No wild frenzy along the waterline as man and beast fought their confused battle. But why did they come up out of the sea to die? And why choose this particular stretch of beach, the site of many strandings, or so he’d read in the local papers? Oh, there were theories, wild conjectures: ideas about a magnetic anomaly out in the rocks at the end of the bay. This would cause a confused geomagnetic sense, according to some scientists. Others argued that the beach was so shallow and wide a lead whale, an old cow perhaps, might chase a school of fish inshore, get confused, and have no idea where offshore was. Still, to Jake, whose last exposure to science had been a survey course in college, it made no sense. No sense at all.

Whales. With a body language all their own of which humans understood only the smallest portion, if

that. Yet this man's body language Jake did understand: the stiffening of the arms, the clenching of fists—one of which was holding something—followed by the sudden relaxing as if he knew Jake wasn't his superior, not physically at any rate. But whatever assessment Ben Rose was making of the experienced cop was altogether wrong. Jake was older, yes, heavier, definitely, but not slower, and definitely not any less smart.

For one thing the sun was at Jake's back, casting him in long shadow. Jake could see the younger man plainly enough. He was a young, slender man with a shock of blond hair that fell forward into his eyes and an expression on his face that could only be described as frightened.

Of him? Of Jake?

He doubted it. Jake had found the man's Blazer with no problem; the other bartender had described it: a present from the uncle, black, wire-rimmed wheels, a raised bed. And parked in the nearest lot, not a hundred yards away, off the road leading down to Tanaman Beach.

"Do I know you?" Ben Rose spoke up finally, his voice heavy, thick, perhaps just a bit slurred. The object in his hand: Jake suddenly identified it as a bottle.

"No." Jake stepped forward onto the sand. "I just want to ask you a few questions, Ben. Ben Rose, that right? I want to ask you about Tara Hart."

"I didn't do anything to Tara."

Later Jake would realize how telling that was, those first words out of the man's mouth. That and

the way he lifted the bottle, then flung it across the sand like a boy skipping a rock across the smooth surface of a lake.

He turned away from Jake, put both hands on top of his head, and sank down into the sand on his knees. As he faced away from Jake, out into Cape Cod Bay, Ben muttered, "Damn it, mister, whoever you are, I love her."

"That's all he said? That's how he said it?" the old police chief demanded. He hadn't been happy to see Jake, had been less than elated to learn that a cop from a neighboring town—in fact a town four towns over, the upper cape, for God's sake!—had been asking the good citizens of Westfleet questions about a supposedly missing woman.

"Yes," Jake replied easily. "That he loves her. Present tense, chief." Jake had been very careful to couch his words, his introduction, his very manner to this man with the utmost civility and respect.

"Look, sergeant . . ." the man nearly choked on the word. He was a heavy man, full-faced, with a florid complexion and two bloodshot, weary-looking eyes—about as far from the young, almost girlish-looking Ben Rose as Jake was from . . .

Well, as Jake was from being the Prince of Wales.

"Look, I don't like the fact you've stormed into my town asking questions—questions *I* should be asking. I've tried to contact your captain, but—"

Jake knew. His chief was in Alabama, police supervisors' convention. Went every year right before

Thanksgiving, but this year Manamesset's chief of police had taken two extra weeks so he could spend his first anniversary there with the young bride he was still besotted with.

"But damn, the man's in Birmingham!" Chief Rose thundered, his heavy jowls quivering. "Where I would be myself if the damn town council saw fit to allocate the funds."

"I don't think anything I've done has been out of line, chief," Jake said pleasantly, fishing a cigarette pack out of his windbreaker, offering him one. He hadn't been offered a seat but was pretending it didn't bother him. "Just asking a few questions on my day off. Tara Hart is a friend . . . of a friend. I told the friend I'd ask around, but I also said she had to come talk to you and file a missing person report."

The chief grunted unpleasantly, took the cigarette, then the offer of a light. "That friend Melanie Wilkerson? Caretaker of the Hartington Place? Hell, yes, came in yesterday noontime. My desk officer called to let me know about it. Sunday, you know. I'm not normally at the station Sundays."

"Understandable," Jake said. "Same in Manamesset. Slow this time of year."

"Slow?" The man snapped. "It's dead! Now, Hyannis, Chatham, even Provincetown, there's still some life, some vitality this time of year, but Westfleet?" He made a sound of dismissal. "Might as well call it a ghost town. We got more places shut up, their alarm systems going full tilt, than we do houses with people in them."

"About the same in Manamesset."

"But the summers . . ." the chief said, moving to the window of his office. The police station was set in a perfect location, overlooking the deep aquamarine waters of Westfleet Harbor. "You should see it. Newport, Hyannis, the Vineyard, they got nothing on Westfleet. Beautiful place. Harbor full of sailboats. And you know what makes Westfleet better than all those other places?" Jake could almost see the twinkle in the chief's eye as he answered his own question: "We're not a tenth as well-known. We're the best-kept secret on the whole Eastern Seaboard."

Jake made a murmur of agreement.

"Still . . . sergeant," the older man went on with a somewhat grudging respect, "friend or not of this so-called missing girl, this is hardly your jurisdiction and you know it. I'll handle things from here."

Being built like a linebacker always gave Jake Valari a certain advantage, even over men who were almost as big. With his feet apart and his arms folded over his chest, he cut an imposing, even slightly threatening figure, and he knew it. He was like the bull that couldn't be moved—until you offered him something he wanted.

So he remained right where he was, standing against the door to Chief Rose's office. "You say Melanie Wilkerson came in yesterday? What have you done so far on the case?"

"It's hardly a case, sergeant," Chief Rose said with some exas-

peration. "A girl—*this* girl—goes missing? If you'd asked around just a little bit more, you'd have found this is typical behavior for Tara Hart, or Tara Hunt or Tara Hartman, all names she's gone by in the past." He nodded, realizing Jake was trying to conceal his surprise. "She's a transient, raised in foster homes, then released on her own at eighteen. No family, not that we can find through state records. And few friends. Worked all over the state and in New Hampshire, mostly at dog tracks, animal shelters, sometimes working with a vet here or there for a month or two. Then moved on, changing her name as easily as you do the oil every six months. Has at least two Social Security numbers, three drivers' licenses." He smiled thinly, letting this sink in, for in this case the plain facts would speak volumes, something both men understood too well.

"Anyhow, the girl's not a high-profile career criminal, sergeant, just a drifter, a wanderer. She served time for petty theft at sixteen—in a state home for juveniles. Would you like to see what else I've got? Of course, I'm only talking about Massachusetts here; odds are she's known in New Hampshire, maybe Maine as well."

Jake realized that he shouldn't have been surprised, but somehow he was. He should have assumed the worst; it was unlike him to believe that Tara was what Melanie had painted her: sweet, kind, innocent, a "lost soul."

"I hope you see why I was less than ecstatic to find my Ben had

taken up with her. I did some checking on her, I'll admit it, and told him what I knew about her. Told him he was going to get hurt, maybe more than he could take, but he didn't care. You see, she's done this before. Boyfriend in Williamstown reported her missing a year ago. Seems she just walked off like she's probably done this time. No forwarding address, no phone, no note, nothing. She finally turns up in New Bedford working a dog track down that area. It seems she's good with animals, sometimes gets a part-time job for a few weeks as a handler's assistant, you know, feeding the dogs, cleaning up after them, that kind of thing. Hell, she just walked out on this guy, left her clothes, her wallet, even her pet chihuahua. She's a strange one, Sergeant Valari, and I'll be honest with you: I'll do my job, and I'll do it well and try to find her, but I'm just as happy to see her out of Ben's life."

"Are you, chief?" Jake asked, immediately regretting the tone of his voice.

"Hey, don't be thinking anything funny—not about me or my Ben!" the other man snapped.

Jake didn't move, didn't even shift his weight. Ben Rose's face was burning bright red as he realized what he'd just said.

The other man ran a huge brown hand down his face. "That didn't sound good, but you got to understand. I raised that boy. My brother died just after Ben was born. And his mother, well, she wasn't fit to raise a child, so I made her an offer, said I'd pay all her rent and bills if I had the say-so in how Ben

was brought up." He gave a quick, fierce nod. "And she agreed to it. That boy's more than just a nephew to me; he's like my own son. You got kids, Sergeant Valari?"

"Two boys."

"Then you know. You know you'll do anything to protect them, bring them up right. Hell, I'm not kidding you any; I can see you're a smart man, and I've checked you out, too. You've got a sterling record, Sergeant Valari, and I'd be a fool to lie to you, so I won't. I hope nothing has happened to Tara, I really do. I hope I find her somewhere safe and sound, working some track in Rhode Island, maybe, who knows? But I also hope she never sets foot in Westfleet again. I want her to stay away from my Ben. She's not good enough for him. He deserves better."

"Can I have a copy of that?" Jake nodded at the folder of information. He knew that if anyone asked the chief would claim it was collected over the last twenty-four hours. But Jake knew better. This was a project the old police chief had been working on, probably for months.

"Hell, why not?" he grunted, picking it up. "I'll photocopy it for you myself."

He read it in his car before driving to the Hartington Place. There was a lot more the chief hadn't told him. State child, yes, but a constant runaway. Involved in gangs briefly in her teens. Charges of vandalism, shoplifting, petty thievery, even a charge of car theft. Then a sudden change as she reached her early twenties and entered a different

phase of her life: wandering from job to job, place to place, and, most likely, man to man. A couple of other waitressing jobs before the latest one at the Lonely Harp in Westfleet. Over a dozen different addresses in a period of less than six years, always picking up and moving on with little or no notice, showing up in a different town, a different city, usually working the local tracks as a dog handler, custodian, or in one of the concession stands.

So what made this disappearance any different from the rest?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

He put out his cigarette and checked the directions Melanie had given him to get to the Hartington Place.

His first words to her as he confronted her across the wide front porch overlooking the marsh, the beach below: "You knew, didn't you?"

He'd thrown the folder down on the glass-topped table there. Beyond her was an expansive living room—wide oak floors, a massive fieldstone fireplace, white wicker furniture, some of it covered with sheets. In a far corner was a white baby grand piano. Ornate sculptures made out of sea glass and driftwood decorated the wall on the far side of the room.

She'd read the folder in silence, lifting papers out neatly, gently, staring at the words, shaking her head, and turning away.

"You knew she was like this. You knew she was going to just get up one day and walk away."

"No," she answered softly, weak-

ly. "I had no idea . . . she never said . . . " She shook her head almost wildly. "No, this is all wrong, Jake. Even if she was . . . she isn't any more. She's changed."

"If you learn one thing in my profession, you learn this: people don't change. You've wasted my time—" Then he said her name, her real name, the name she thought she'd run away from, had killed and buried forever, or so everyone who'd ever known her by that name believed. Except for the two of them.

And she faced him defiantly, the spirit rising in her, and walking across the porch, confronted him, daring him to call her by that name again.

"No!" she declared angrily. "People do change! I changed, Sergeant Valari. I left that other world—and so did Tara!"

But there was no convincing him. "Have you really? No, *Melanie*." He dragged her name out with sarcastic emphasis. "No. You wanted to believe that Ben Rose—*young Ben Rose*—was like the vicious thugs you lived and worked with for—how long? Fifteen years? Or was it longer? Yes, you've lived too long among the damned, *Melanie*, for you to see people any way other than cruel, corrupt, and contemptible. You wanted to believe that Ben killed Tara, or worse yet, that his uncle got rid of her because he didn't want his precious nephew dragged down by her. But it didn't happen that way—*Melanie*. Tara Hart did what she always does—she walked away. From you, from Ben, from whatever life she had, so briefly, here in Westfleet. She aban-

doned you just as she'd been abandoned for eighteen years, in foster home after foster home. That's her revenge on life. It's her revenge on you and unfortunately on Ben Rose, who's the only one in this little mess I feel bad for. Now goodbye. Like I said, you've wasted enough of my time."

"You're wrong!" she shouted as he turned on his heel and started down the stairs. "You're wrong! Something has happened to her! She didn't leave on her own! She wouldn't!"

But he ignored her and, getting into his car, drove away.

"Found her on Tanaman . . . in the marsh." Jake heard Fred Andersen's flat monotone behind him.

"Suffocated, so they say. Don't they mean drowned?"

He couldn't respond, had been holding the mug in his hand so long he was sure the coffee in it was cold by now.

Jake looked down as Officer Andersen, oblivious to Jake's reaction, or possibly lack of one, read on. "Medical examiner says she's been in the marsh four, maybe five days. Foul play suspected, the boyfriend the chief suspect. Well, heck—" Fred gave a kind of clucking chuckle; the man had never learned to laugh properly. "'Course it's foul play! Found fully clothed but badly bruised! The guy says when he last saw her she was okay, just a little drunk. According to him, he came out of the bar and found her waiting in his truck. They went to

the beach, shared a bottle of wine, then had a little fight. Little? Damn! He beat her good and dumped her in the marsh, or maybe just left her on the beach. Not a lot of details. Damn paper."

They'd given all her names in the paper. Hart. Hunt. Hartman. But always the first name, Tara, alongside the photograph the dead woman's "friend and roommate, Melanie Wilkerson of Westfleet Shores," had "supplied the investigating officers, a unit comprising both local police and state troopers."

The only bit of solace Jake Valari could find in the whole sorry situation was that Tara had assuredly been dead by the time he'd started asking about her. But it was small solace indeed.

"The papers are basically correct. Of course, some details are being left out," the county medical examiner, an old friend of Jake's, said over the phone. "What's your interest in this, Jake? Are you—"

Jake cut him off. "What details?"

"Such as the extent of the bruising." The man heaved a huge sigh. Behind his voice Jake could hear the boom and roll of the sea, the squall of gulls. He was another man who spent his working hours in an office overlooking the water. "She was beaten quite badly, with a stick or bat or something heavy like a wine bottle. One whole side of her body. If you want to come see—"

"No. Was she—"

The answer was almost too quick. "No. But there's other things that are very strange, Jake."

"Such as?"

"No marks on the hands. Nothing under the fingernails or any signs she tried to fight off the attacker or protect herself. And the bruising, it's all down one side of the body. Deep bruises on the face, down the right shoulder and the arm, across part of the back and hip. She wasn't beaten to death. The cause of death, now listen to this, even though she was found in a ditch in Tanaman Marsh, is suffocation. She didn't drown. She suffocated. We found sand in the mouth—white beach sand, not mud from the marsh—as well as in the throat and trace amounts in the trachea. She must have died on the beach, got pulled out with the tide, and was brought back again with the currents, dumped in the marsh."

Jake felt his head spin. He wanted to sit, but he had always taken bad news standing, so he lurched forward, put his hand down on his desk. "Are you saying someone . . . held her head . . ."

"Or she was unconscious, and he left her facedown." A pause; the man was trying to figure it out even as he talked. "It's hard to tell with a body that's been in the water for several days. She was also drinking. Blood alcohol was 0.18."

"Time of death?"

"Can't say with a lot of precision. My guess is that same night she walked out of the Lonely Harp. That's about all I can tell you."

"Thanks," Jake murmured, finally taking the seat behind his desk.

Not his case, Jake thought as he

leafed through file folders and reports scattered like ragged leaves across his desk. Not his case.

These were his cases: a minor traffic accident in the center of town; grave markers toppled over in Manamesset Bay Cemetery; house alarms being set off along Bayview Road.

So no one had contacted him about the Tara Hart case. Not the county D.A.'s office, not the state trooper "now leading the investigation into yet another 'homeless' woman's unexplained death." Not Melanie Wilkerson, and certainly not Chief Ben Rose.

Old Ben Rose, who had just finished making a heavy, heartfelt statement from the front steps of the white-columned police station overlooking Westfleet Harbor.

Jake leaned forward over his desk, adjusted the small black and white television set's volume.

"Yes, yes . . . and I'm officially off the case." Chief Benjamin Rose, his huge red face on the verge of shock, or tears, was responding to the small contingent of local news reporters surrounding him. "And if I have to, I'll resign."

Questions were being thrown at him, wildly so; Jake could barely make them all out. The TV set was old; Jake rose to turn the volume up higher. The set crackled and Jake lost part of a question, then: "I know it doesn't look good for my nephew," Chief Rose was saying. It was a windy morning on Cape Cod Bay. Jake could see the water in the distance, a fishing boat bobbing up and down in the white-capped surf. "But I sincerely be-

lieve—" he shook his head heavily, wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief "—in his innocence. Ben would never . . ."

Then suddenly, with a wave of his hand, the chief accompanied by several of his officers left the steps of the building, leaving the insistent, jammering reporters behind.

For a few minutes Jake just stared into space, set now turned down low. Weather reports. News out of Washington, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, it all slid by like a cacophony of background music as he let his mind rest, drift, and sift through the various ins and outs of what had seemed such a simple scenario. He shut his eyes, sat back in his tired old chair.

A girl, a drifter, a transient, moves in and out of people's lives like a—like a vivid melody, touching those around her to such an extent that her sudden, unexplained departure is painful, almost brutally so. An innocent girl Melanie had called her.

And young Ben Rose, well, he had told Jake he loved her.

Had Jake been wrong? To think that sudden, unexplained departures had been Tara Hart's way of reconciling her past? Had this truly been Tara Hart's manifesto, that I shall leave those who care about me—as those I cared for once left me?

Or was there another reason, another motive hidden beneath all the confusion? That Tara wandered from place to place, person to person, utterly and totally in search of that which she never could find as a child? And that whenever, at last, with heartbreaking reality what

she wanted was just within her reach—she pulled back. Unable to make that final, desperate lunge. Afraid of the pain. Afraid of rejection. Yes, it was definitely a better explanation, but Jake knew he was no psychologist and that this was all just meaningless conjecture. How could he or anyone who'd lived the life he had—close-knit, loving family; supportive, caring parents and grandparents; even a marriage, however brief, that had given him two intelligent, healthy sons—ever start to imagine the life Tara Hart had known?

A life that had ended with a brutal beating and suffocation in the sands of Tanaman Beach in West-fleet, Massachusetts?

"Not my case," he murmured aloud, then looked across the room at the empty chair sitting there. An old director's chair, canvas seat, faded green and ivory stripes. How many had sat there—imposed on him, his knowledge, his time, his authority—asking for assistance?

Or lending it?

At once his mind drifted back in yet another direction, to the fourteen-year-old boy whom . . . he had abandoned? Or had Herbie abandoned him? For one wrenching moment Jake felt the kind of pain Tara Hart might have—must have—felt on seeing everything she loved, cared about, slip away from her.

He lifted the file folder Chief Rose had photocopied for him, leafed through it.

Six foster homes before Tara was five years old. What had that been like? And in two of them she had

been taken away after social workers had noticed that the "child's condition" showed "obvious signs of abuse and neglect."

Abuse and neglect by whom? By the foster parents to whom she'd been entrusted?

Jake felt sick at his stomach, tossed the folder back on the desk.

Then looked up startled, no, shocked, to see that he had been so deep in thought he hadn't heard the boy come in. Herbie Sawyer, the only person who was ever allowed to enter his office without fanfare, without Fred's even poking his head in to say, "The kid's here."

No, Jake was pretty certain Herbie had let himself in.

All the same, he was damned glad to see him.

"I need a ride to the aquarium," Herbie told Jake. "I mean, if you've got the time. Paul can't take me this afternoon, doing some overtime or something." A shrug and a sip of the coke Jake had gotten from the vending machine outside.

"Paul." Why was that such a hard name for Jake to say? "Your mother's friend."

Herbie swept his hand through his hair. Definitely too long. If Jake had still been seeing Emily, he'd have dragged a pair of scissors through the kid's hair himself.

"Yeah," he answered. "He thinks it's a good way for him and me to bond." A smirk across the boy's handsome face. "I let him think it, but we hardly talk the whole way down."

Jake glanced back at the folders on his desk. Nothing there that

couldn't wait, so grabbing his windbreaker off the back of his chair, he said, "Hell, why not? I need to get out of this place anyhow."

So Herbie was letting his mother's new boyfriend think this was a "bonding activity," ferrying the boy back and forth to the Mid-Cape Aquarium to visit the whale named Franklin. Letting him think it so he could get a free ride down and back. Yet the truth was, if Herbie was using his mother's boyfriend, he wasn't treating Jake much better: dead silence as the boy read from a partly folded newspaper in his lap.

Still, it was good to see him, just to sit in the car with him, and if Herbie wanted to use him the same way he used Paul Fiore, what the hell did he care? Paul could try to bond with Herbie all he wanted, and Herbie could be as sullen and silent as he liked; there was still a connection between this old detective and the fourteen-year-old kid that Paul Fiore would never have. Herbie could pretend it wasn't there, that it was gone or had never existed, but that didn't change a thing.

Jake knew it when he stopped to pick up some doughnuts and got Herbie's favorite kind without asking. Angel Creme with chocolate sprinkles. He plopped the bag down on top of the newspaper in Herbie's lap and watched the boy's face light up, turning from sober indifference to sudden delight.

Then watched the light die down again as if he knew what Jake was up to.

"So, how's Franklin doing?" Jake asked as he put the car in gear, turned back onto Route 6.

"Okay. They're going to release him next spring, they think," was the boy's answer. "Hey . . ."

"Hey?" Jake softly echoed.

"Hey, that woman, you know, the one they just found, the one the boyfriend beat up? They found her . . . in a marsh."

Jake was quiet, waiting, pretending to watch the traffic with keen interest.

"Do you remember when I—" The boy stopped, doughnut in hand, silent.

"Yeah, I remember, Herbie. Almost three years ago now. You and me." Jake was careful not to look at him.

"Yeah." His voice was a whisper. "I found a body in a marsh, too, but anyhow, I've been following this one, Jake, on the news, and . . ."

Jake wanted to hold his breath, but there was nothing Herbie could offer here. No matter how good Herbie Sawyer's instincts and insights were—and they were very often very good—anything he might say now was nothing more than wild speculation.

"And you know, I figure there's only two ways it could have happened."

Jake passed a slow-moving farm truck doing about twenty.

"I mean, the guy, the boyfriend, might be right—she could have died from natural causes. She was drunk. He said they were both drinking. So he could have left her and she fell and drowned, though one reporter said her mouth and nose were full of sand. Did you know that, Jake? This guy, he writes for the *Westfleet Voice*—" Herbie indi-

cated the paper in his lap "—said that, though I don't think anyone else has picked up on it."

"First I heard that," Jake lied.

"So, she just drowns or smothers, whatever. It's all the same, isn't it? Lack of oxygen to the brain." He took a bite of doughnut. "Then the tides take her out—" a dramatic pause "—and they bring her back again."

"You really think it happened that way?" Jake asked. "Her body was badly bruised."

"That's the second way. He beat her up and left her there to die."

"I think that's more likely—"

"Or someone else did it. Or something else happened."

"Herbie—" Suddenly Jake wanted to talk about anything else, but just when he didn't think he could be surprised more by the boy, he was.

"You know, I've seen her before. So have you."

And did a damn poor job disguising it. "Seen who? Who are you talking about?"

"The woman. I saw her on TV this morning. She didn't want to talk to anyone. A couple of Cable 58 reporters out of Hyannis tried to talk to her. You know the one, the dead girl's friend, her roommate." A pause as Herbie nibbled on the doughnut. "I know who she is."

His worst fears realized.

And yet, didn't it have to happen sooner or later? Melanie was living less than sixty miles from her old hometown of Manamesset. And her elderly aunt lived in Herbie's neighborhood. It had only been a matter of time.

"She's the woman you were talking to the day of the whales. I see her at the aquarium once in a while. Her name is Melanie."

Jake turned his head so quickly it was a wonder he didn't get one of those sharp, needlelike pains up the back of his skull. Just as he did, the radio crackled in his car. He lifted the receiver, incredulous eyes still on the boy sitting next to him.

"Yeah, he's with me." Jake found himself answering Fred Andersen's monotonous questions. "Is that right? Paul Fiore's been looking for him?" Jake's eyes came down on Herbie. "And Paul saw Herbie's bike parked in front of the station? That so? Paul was planning to drive him to the aquarium? He still there, Fred? Put him on."

Less than a minute of quick conversation, then a slamming down of the receiver; the boy didn't so much as jump.

"You lied to me," Jake said.

"Heck, what am I supposed to do? Tell Paul—" Herbie said the man's name with abject distaste "—that I want to go to the aquarium with you so I can pump your brains? What kind of jerk do you think I am, anyhow?"

Jake made a sound of disgust, started looking for an exit so he could turn around, head back.

"You talked to her that day in the surf, Jake," Herbie went on. A pause, a sigh, and then: "I went to see you on Monday, and Officer Andersen said you'd taken the day off, gone to Westfleet, but he didn't know why. I didn't think much of it then, but after they found the body in the marsh, and then I saw her,

Melanie, on TV—"A pause, pregnant with meaning. "I figured you might be involved."

Suddenly none of this surprised Jake, except: "You came to see me on Monday?"

"Yeah." The boy popped the last bite of doughnut into his mouth. "I didn't have a ride to the aquarium that day—for real. Mom was working overtime, and I'd called Paul a jerk the day before, so he said he wouldn't drive me."

"Really."

"Really." Another sigh, and slowly, almost painfully slowly, the inquisitive and intelligent boy he'd met two and a half years ago was there, sitting in the seat beside him. "You know Melanie Wilkerson. You went to Westfleet Monday. The dead girl, Tara Hart, was last seen on Friday night, leaving the restaurant she worked at. Her boyfriend, the bartender, left a little while later. The boyfriend says he found Tara in his truck asleep. He woke her up, and they went to Tanaman Beach, shared a bottle of her favorite wine." He drew in a deep breath. "Melanie Wilkerson called you, didn't she? She asked you to help find Tara Hart."

He couldn't deny a single word of it. "Herbie, there's nothing I can do about this. It's not my case, not my jurisdiction—"

"This guy, this Ben Rose, he says after they finished off a bottle of Rhine Bear, 1983, they had an argument. He asked Tara to marry him, and she froze up, wouldn't answer. He says it led to a fight, and he left her there on the beach. He says he never touched her. But the

police say he beat her up and left her to die."

"Herbie—" Suddenly it was hard to drive, to concentrate on everything spinning around in his head at once, all the facts, theories, and their limitations that Herbie was throwing at him.

"Makes no sense, does it? If he beat her, and she was as strong as she had to be to be a waitress and work in an animal shelter and, the paper says, at least a half dozen dog tracks around the state as an assistant animal handler—" he reopened the paper "—then why didn't she fight him off, or at least try?"

"She'd been drinking." A weak jab; Herbie flung it back at him:

"Hey, drunk or not, you'd at least try, wouldn't you? Plus, I don't figure Ben Rose as a violent guy, do you?"

He glanced again at Herbie, realizing the exit for the aquarium was just ahead.

"Bartender. Well-liked. A nice guy." Herbie was relentless. "No evidence he ever hit or hurt any of his other girlfriends, and according to the paper, he had plenty. They got witnesses that said the two of them argued sometimes but that Ben always gave in to her, then sent her flowers the next day. So what's up with that?"

Yeah, Jake was thinking, what's up with that? For a moment other, more bizarre explanations were jostling around in his head. What about Ben's uncle? The man who "knew" his nephew was innocent?

And even Melanie. Asking Jake to look into something she knew was already finished? Was it possible?

Herbie bit his lip, looked down at the papers in his lap. "Something's not right about this, Jake. Something's just a little bit off, and . . ." He shut his eyes, shook his head. "It's right there in front of me, but I can't quite see it." He spun around to face Jake suddenly. "Crazy, huh? Hey—" And then, his mind moving in a completely different direction, he cried out, "There's the aquarium! Wait till you see Franklin! He's gained about forty pounds since they brought him in. Him and Wilson both."

"We met on Columbus Day. James Morgan," the man said, extending, somewhat awkwardly, his right hand to Jake, explaining as he did, "I'm a lefty, Sergeant Valari." Herbie had just reintroduced the aquarium director to Jake, then run off down the long dark corridors toward the main holding tanks. "Had a little problem with my arm on our last expedition out at Tanaman, which, by the way, I want to thank you again for. You and Herbie both were a great help. We can't do this alone."

"What can I say, Dr. Morgan," Jake said. "We were in the neighborhood."

"Jimmy," the man said quickly. "My friends call me Jimmy." Extending his arm, he indicated that Jake walk ahead of him.

The whales, squealing, breaking the water, were anxiously awaiting the frozen herring that Herbie and a young woman with bright red hair were tossing into the tank.

"Feeding time. Herbie likes to come at feeding time. Boy's going to

make a great oceanographer," the director said as he leaned over the railing of the tank. "We're getting ready to pull them up, give them their weekly weigh-in, take some blood samples. Maybe you'd like to stay and watch?"

Jake was completely agreeable. To see Herbie so happy, laughing and tossing fish to the whales, then reaching out to tap one—Franklin? Wilson?—on the head as they swam by, he'd have taken a room in town, stayed all night.

"Sounds great. Tell me if there's anything I can do to help."

"You're quiet, Jake," Herbie said softly as they shared burgers and fries at the nearest fast-food place. "I guess it was kind of boring for you, huh? You're not a huge whale fan." It wasn't said disparagingly but almost with humor and a bright-eyed smile that Jake wished he could bottle and keep forever.

He grabbed a fry from Herbie's plate. "No. No, I enjoyed it. Learned a lot, Herbie. Took how many people to get that whale into the sling?"

"Six, and Dr. Morgan, you saw how they wouldn't let him help?"

"Yeah," Jake said, his concentration drifting again.

"They're strong, those whales, and tough. Dr. Morgan, he had an accident with one on Columbus Day. Hurt himself real bad."

"Yeah," Jake said again. "Hey, think he's still at the aquarium? Because if he is, I want to go back and talk to him before we head home. Do you mind?"

Two hours ago Jake had watched

with keen interest as Franklin had been urged, cajoled, and gently slid and pushed into the canvas sling that would raise him above the half-drained tank for his weekly weigh-in. Dr. Morgan, stripped down to shorts and T-shirt, had supervised the small team of young men and women. Some were volunteers, a few were students, and the rest professionals on the aquarium staff, but the director had stayed away from the animal as it was hoisted. At his instruction two young veterinary students had taken a blood sample.

Herbie hadn't been allowed into the tank but watched and took the blood samples from the students, placing the test tubes into the kit that held them.

What had Herbie said in the car on the way out here—that it's probably right there in front of us and we don't see it. But Jake knew that perhaps he *was* seeing it: there, in the person of Dr. James Morgan.

Jimmy.

Jimmy, and the words "Look out!" were suddenly right there before him. No, no, it had gone like this: "Look out! Oh no!" followed by a second voice: "Over there—Jimmy, be careful!"

Now he was being admitted into Dr. Morgan's cramped, disheveled office so similar to Jake's: files strewn about, computers stacked on top of computers. An old radio, a small portable TV set, and books—books everywhere. Marine biology, geology, archaeology. Animal sciences Jake had never heard of: cetology, ichthyology, vertebrate morphology. But despite the lateness of

the hour and the possibility that Dr. Morgan had a home, even a family, to return to and a dinner quickly growing cold, he'd admitted Jake back into the aquarium with a courtesy that belied his bewilderment.

A tall, goodlooking man, dusky brown hair, sun- and wind-tanned features, and squinting eyes that burned a bright blue as he offered Jake a seat and gave permission for Herbie to visit the whales while he and Jake talked.

"Sergeant—" he extended a hand to the weatherbeaten director's chair so similar to the one in Jake's office. "Is there anything else I can do?" He settled back against an array of computers.

"Just a few questions, that's all. Ten minutes of your time."

"Questions? Sergeant? . . . because I know you're a police officer with the town of . . . Manamesset? Where Herbie lives."

"Yes, detective sergeant," Jake clarified uneasily. "Just go with me, would you? I need to know some things, about . . . whale strandings."

"Whale—" Dr. Morgan gave a short sigh. "What can I tell you, sergeant?"

"Jake," he replied. "Strandings. Do they occur at any particular time of year?"

"Any time, sergeant . . . Jake."

"Along Tanaman—any time of year? How often?"

"Any time, and how often—it varies. We can go for years without a single episode and then have several over a period of months."

"And do they always strand in groups?"

"Generally speaking, yes."

"But do they . . ." Jake knew he was standing on weak ground, but he had to ask. "Ever strand alone?"

"Not in my experience, but . . ." Morgan shut his eyes. "Excuse me. A year ago, yes, a year ago, we got a report of a whale who'd pushed itself up into Yorky's Marsh, about a quarter of a mile from this last stranding. We thought it was a legitimate report. But when we got there—nothing. Apparently the whale, if there was a whale, had pushed itself off."

The question was answered before it was even asked.

"If there was a whale."

Morgan shrugged. "We'll never know. If there was, it was good news that one got away on its own. We don't want any strandings."

"Thanks. Now, would you do one more thing for me?" Jake asked, standing slowly. "Would you roll up your left sleeve, please?"

Morgan frowned, then with a broad smile did as asked.

"You said a whale did that?" Jake asked, walking closer to him.

"Sure as hell did. I get a little too close sometimes, took a good whack. Still hurts like hell. A deep tissue bruise they call it." His entire arm from shoulder nearly to fingertips was a bilious yellow and blue.

"Now," Morgan started to roll his sleeve down, "will you tell me what all these questions are about?"

Oh, they were skeptical at first—everyone but the young man's team of lawyers. Enough for reasonable doubt.

Reasonable doubt that what had killed Tara Hart on Tanaman

Beach had not been one angry, rejected young man but another angry and perhaps rejected young pilot whale. Two tons of pilot whale, slapping against a slightly drunken Tara with enough force to knock her down, unconscious, where the dying tides left her smothering in the sand.

Oh, the whale got free, returned to the waves without—or just maybe with—her help. Drunk as she was, she probably thought she could manage the animal herself, a tragic and monumental mistake. Besides . . .

"Tara had a great heart. She loved animals. She worked right alongside us that day," Melanie told Jake. "It was Tara who cried out to Dr. Morgan, to Jimmy, to look out—right before he got clobbered by the whale, a big cow. He didn't notice the bruises until the next day, or so I heard. He kind of downplayed it."

She frowned, scuffed her feet along the edge of the lavish porch. "But it does explain—" she grimaced, bit down on her lip and looked up into the gray sky, gulls circling overhead, then down at the marsh where a flock of white and black ducks were wheeling, settling down. Going south perhaps.

"Down one side of her body, the mark of a—" she shuddered.

"Its fluke, or tail probably, slamming against her as she tried to push it off. When I mentioned it to the medical examiner, he agreed, said he'd seen a similar case, a guy hit in the side with a steel girder. It didn't kill him right away. Died several hours later of internal bleed-

ing, but he had the same kind of bruises. In Tara's case it was enough to knock her out—she smothered in the sand.”

She shuddered again. “Ben Rose is still going to trial,” she said absently.

“I know. But the evidence leans in the direction of the whale, Melanie, and if not enough to convince a jury of his innocence, then enough to create reasonable doubt. Dr. Morgan will testify that whales have stranded themselves singly along that stretch of beach. It's in the historical record if not in his experience. And some whales do return to the sea without any human intervention.”

“It would have been better if that whale had died that night. If we could have found its body.” She turned her head, afraid to cry.

“Along with Tara's?” Jake said. “Would she have wanted that?”

“I hate you,” she whispered. “I wanted . . . I thought . . .”

“You wanted to believe Ben or his uncle killed her, you think I don't know that? But she didn't want Ben and . . .”

“To get away from him, she would have left me, too. I have no doubt of it. I would have lost her either way, and now, now you're telling me a whale, a damned . . .” She turned, headed back toward the house. “She could connect only with animals, Jake.” She reached down, lifted a brown and gray cat into her

arms, rubbed its fur against her face. “Damn. I wish she'd come for me. I wish . . .”

“Maybe she intended to, Melanie. We'll never know.”

“Hell.” She swung around on him. “You'll get your payment. I haven't forgotten.”

“No. I got enough . . . I learned enough. You don't owe me anything.”

She shook her head fiercely, looked across the marsh to the sight of a young teenage boy tossing sticks into the air, gulls wheeling overhead. He was running, laughing, then picking up stones, flinging them out across the water.

“There's an airstrip in Southern California where they bring in contraband once a month from Mexico. It's still active. I checked last night, old connections.” She turned on him almost violently. “Drugs, including that new one, that date rape drug, and sometimes they bring in other things, too. Children. Babies with light skins for wealthy Anglos who can't have any.” A thin smile stretched across her mouth. “Appropriate, don't you think? Shut down a baby ring—payment for a young girl who never had a real childhood.”

“Thank you,” Jake said, then said it again, along with her other name, her real name. “Thank you—”

She just smiled and went to the end of the porch to watch the boy run across the beach.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

The men of Homicide Division sat waiting in the conference room of the 12th Precinct. The coffee in their Styrofoam cups had cooled. At last Captain O'Toole strode in. They were relieved to note he was smiling.

"Good news on the murder of Jocko Rosconi!" he announced.

The men leaned forward eagerly. This case had baffled them for weeks. Rosconi, a right-hand man of the head of the Grim Ghouls gang, had been shot at close range. His bullet-ridden body was discovered several days later in a dumpster. Suspicion naturally fell on the rival Silky Skull gang, but no efforts of the division had paid off. The killing remained unsolved. They had nothing to report. Absolutely nothing. Meanwhile, the media were giving the department a hard time—"Good Citizens No Longer Safe on Our Streets," that sort of thing—overlooking the fact that the victim was far from qualifying as a good citizen.

"Yes," continued O'Toole, "we finally got a break. We convinced two members of the Skulls to finger the triggerman in exchange for immunity in a hijacking—plus, of course, the reward offered by the Committee for a Safer City."

"Do you trust these informers?" asked Sergeant Proctor.

"Sammie 'the Snitch' Siller and Ringo 'the Rat' Rinaldo have been pretty reliable in the past. In addition, they're scared out of their pants in connection with this hijacking. They claim they actually witnessed the shooting."

"Well," asked Lieutenant Campbell, "who did it?"

"Siller and Rinaldo won't give a name," replied the captain, "but they agree they'll identify him in a lineup. It's one of the seven regulars hanging out at the Silver Shark saloon. Proctor and Campbell, take a SWAT team out there and bring in all seven."

"Gee," said Sergeant Proctor as he and his partner left the conference room, "that's a tough place in a tougher neighborhood. I hope our back-up is prepared."

"They always are," declared the lieutenant. He laughed. "I'll stake my life on it."

"Not funny," retorted the sergeant.

In response to the bullhorn, the seven suspects marched out of the

Silver Shark with their hands in the air. They had shed their black leather jackets with the distinctive skull insignia and were wearing hastily donned coats and sweaters.

"Police brutality!" shouted one in case any reporters were around. There were none.

"Hey, man," said Sammie Siller anxiously, "you sure this glass is just one-way?"

"It is," Lieutenant Campbell assured him, "and this room is sound-proof. They can't see you, they can't hear you. You understand that you will have to testify in court later. Afterward, we'll get both of you into a witness relocation program."

"That 'relocation' deal better be good," muttered Ringo Rinaldo. "They won't like us after we finger the boss's favorite boy."

"While we're waitin' around for the trial," said Siller apprehensively, "we ain't exactly comfortable, y'know what I mean?"

"You will be in protective custody until that time," promised Campbell. "Now, if you're ready, I'll have the seven suspects brought into the lineup."

"We'll not actually identify the killer," declared Ringo. "Just identify him by what he's wearin'."

As the seven marched onto the platform, Sammie remarked, "Hey, lookut! They even got Mr. Napoli."

Ringo added, "I sure wish I could afford alligator boots like of of 'em is wearin'. And that herringbone jacket musta cost a bundle. I'll even bet that black tie is pure silk."

"Okay," said Campbell, "let's start. Sergeant Proctor will take notes."

(1) "See that guy in the brown sweater," said Sammie, "the one standin' just to the right of the man wearin' black shoes and just to the left of Mr. Ivanoff? Them three are Augie, Bart, and Greg."*

(2) Ringo spoke. "The big man in the brown boots, who ain't Danny or Eddie, is just to the right of Carlos (who's not the guy in the polka-dot tie) and just to the left of the man in the brown tie. They include Mr. Jablonski (who's not wearin' the brown sweater), Mr. Hanewicz, and Mr. Leoncello."

(3) Sammie declared, "Mr. Kosta is standin' just to the right of the man in the striped sweater (who's not Mr. Mankato) and just to the left of the guy in the polka-dot tie. They are the three wearin' buckskin shoes, black boots, and brown shoes."

* "Left" and "right" as viewed by the informers. Sequence X-Y-Z is thus: Y standing at the right of X and at the left of Z.

(4) Ringo then remarked, "Mr. Leoncello is the man just to the right of Frankie and just to the left of the man in tan oxfords. They include the men in the tweed coat, brown sweater, and black sweater. Manka-to ain't the guy in the tan oxfords."

(5) Sammie said, "The guy in the black sweater stands just to the right of Mr. Jablonski. Eddie is somewhere farther to the right. They have on green, red, and striped neckties. The one in the striped tie is just to the left of the guy wearin' brown shoes."

(6) "Keep in mind," said Ringo, "that Greg ain't the man in the striped sweater (who is not wearin' the gold tie)."

(7) Sammie added, "Augie ain't the guy in the gold or red necktie. In fact, none of the three is standin' fifth from the left."

(8) Sergeant Proctor remarked, "I notice the man at the far left is neither the one in the navy jacket nor the one in the red tie."

(9) Lieutenant Campbell noted that neither the suspect in black boots nor the one wearing the tan sport coat was sixth from the left, although the former was closer to the left end of the line.

"Well," inquired Sergeant Proctor, "which one was the killer?"

"Oh, him," answered Sammie Siller. "I guess Ringo and me forgot to mention: he's the guy in the gold necktie."

Who shot Jocko Rosconi and was identified in the lineup?

See page 140 for the solution to the July/August puzzle.

.....

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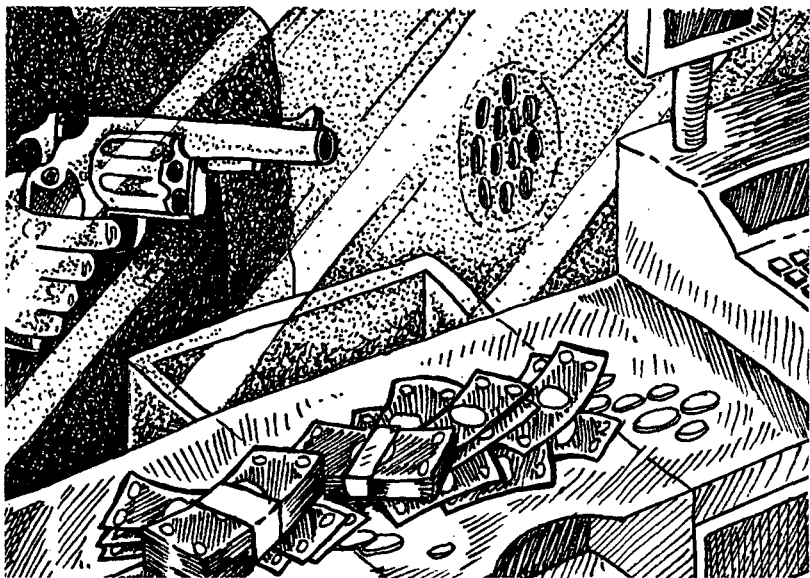
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CAUGHT ON TAPE

David Dietrich

“**I**s that a gun?”
I’m standing in front of the counter of the Gas ‘n’ Go three hundred and twenty days into my “felony a day for a year” campaign when this guy asks what is probably the most idiotic question I’ve ever heard. I say idiotic because at this moment I’m pointing a nickel-plated .44 hand cannon straight at him. From a hundred yards you can tell it’s a gun. But not this yahoo. Since underneath my mildly tough exterior I’m a nice guy, I answer, “Yes, it is.”

“Cool,” he replies, “can I hold it?”

“No,” I say, peering at his nametag through the Plexiglas that separates us, “. . . Brad. You may *not* hold my gun. Just empty the register into that bag, and I’ll be on my merry way. We can part as friends.”

Brad’s not so sure about that. “I don’t know,” he says. “I really need

this job, and I don't think my boss would like it very much if I just gave you the money."

"Would he prefer that you get your head blown off?" I ask.

Brad has to think for a moment. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure? He must be a real jerk."

"*She's* not that bad."

"So give me the money."

"But see, she doesn't own the store. She's just the manager, and I don't know what *her* boss would do to *her* . . . and me, I guess . . . if I just gave you the money." Right then Brad moves his right hand just a little bit. Just a quick motion. But before I give it much more thought, a camera mounted near the ceiling catches my eye.

"That thing work?" I ask, pointing at the camera with my .44.

Brad shakes his head. "Nah. Hasn't worked at least since I started here, so it's been at least six months."

Good, I think. One less thing to worry about. Then I check my watch. I've been here five minutes already. Shoulda been gone three minutes ago.

"Look, Brad," I say, with just a hint of force, "things like this happen every day. No one expects you to give up your life for what's in that drawer. Don't you think you're worth more than a hundred bucks?"

"It's more like a thousand," he says. "I kinda haven't been dropping the twenties into the safe like I'm supposed to be."

Now he's upped the ante for me just a bit. A thousand bucks from this place would be a pretty good score.

"Just hand it over," I say.

"Look, if my boss finds out I haven't been dropping the big bills, I'll get fired," Brad protests.

"Tell 'em I forced you to open the safe," I say.

"But I don't know the combination! They know I don't know the combination! I'm not *supposed* to know the combination!"

"Then tell 'em . . . tell 'em whatever you want. Just give me the money!"

But Brad is momentarily frozen like a deer in headlights. Then he begins to cop a bit of an attitude.

"You wouldn't shoot me over a thousand dollars, would you?"

The answer I think is no, but I gotta sound tough and tell him, "You don't want to find out." Then he looks at me, like maybe he's sizing me up, and for the first time I see what might be a ray of light shining through his otherwise dim exterior.

"I don't think you would," he tells me, shaking his head.

"Why is that?" I ask.

"'Cause you haven't done it already. I think you woulda done it by now if you were gonna."

"Maybe I'm just being nice," I say.

He keeps looking at me, which makes me strangely uncomfortable. Then he asks, "Did you have a troubled childhood?"

I can't believe it. It's four A.M. in the Gas 'n' Go, I'm holding a .44 on him, and now Brad wants to play amateur psychiatrist.

"Brad," I ask him, "do you understand the concept of the armed robbery?" He stares blankly at me. "You see, what I'm holding in my hand is a *gun*. A *gun* that, if I so much as twitch my right index finger, will tear a hole the size of a baseball through your chest. But I don't want to do that. All I want is a simple transaction. You give me all the money in the register, and I let you live. You see, it's just business."

Brad ignores what I said and shakes his head. "You know, I remember seeing this program on TV once. I think it was on PBS. Anyway, it was one of those 'inside the criminal mind' things, and they said that most criminals had had unhappy childhoods."

I resent the suggestion that I'm some sort of *common* criminal, but I bite my lip.

"Look, Brad. You wanna think that I had a rotten childhood, if that'll make it easier for you to hand over the money, then go ahead."

"So you *didn't* have an unhappy childhood?" There's something about the way he keeps saying "unhappy childhood" that makes me want to shoot him just on principle.

"No, Brad, I didn't. Mine was pure apple pie and summer camp."

"So how'd you get started in this?" he asks.

"Look, Geraldo," I respond, "forget about my history, okay?"

I check my watch again. Cripes . . . I'm pushing ten minutes in this place. Way too long. Then, like I'm coming out of some daydream, the thought of there being a silent alarm suddenly pops into my mind. I should have thought about that at least five minutes ago. Like when he moved his hand. He could have pressed the button then. The cops . . . it hits me. If he pressed the button, they'd be here by now, wouldn't they? I throw a glance out the front door, but it's way too dark to see anything. If they *were* here, they'd be *here*, I convince myself.

"Is there an alarm button over there?" I ask.

"Yeah," he replies innocently, "but I haven't pressed it or anything."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"But you're supposed to. You said a couple of minutes ago how worried you were about handing over the money. I'm sure your boss told you to press the button at a time like this."

"Look," he replies with more than a hint of defiance as he points to his nametag, "it says here that I'm the assistant manager. That means I call the shots on my shift. At least as long as my boss and her boss aren't around. So if I wanna press the button, I'll press the button. If I don't, I won't."

"Fine," I say. But it doesn't sit right, so I continue. "So let me get this straight: you say you can make the call about pressing the button all by yourself, but anything having to do with the money is over your head?"

Brad soaks this up for a moment. I've struck a nerve. "No, it's not *over my head*," he says. "I just don't have to press the button if I don't want to."

It seems to make sense to him, so I let it go. "All right, so you don't have to press the button. That's fine with me. No need to press *that* button. But how about pressing the button on the cash register that opens the drawer, so we can just get this over with?"

"Why're you in such a rush?" he wants to know. Another stupid question, I think at first. I mean, I'm only robbing the place after all. No need to be in a hurry to do that, right? But then I take a mental step back and see myself, gun in hand, having an early-morning chatfest with Brad, the assistant manager of the Gas 'n' Go. Who's the stupid one here?

"It's kinda lonely around here this time of the morning," Brad tells me. Great. Another tangent. "If we can just talk a little longer," he continues, "maybe I'll just give you the money and we can part ways as friends, like you said."

He's irritating. Very irritating. Like having a rock in your shoe that you can't seem to shake out. You shake the shoe, put it back on, and the rock's still there. Brad is my rock. But for some reason I also like him. Not in any romantic way, if that's what you're thinking, but the guy has a certain charm. He's facing what he probably thinks could be certain death, and he wants to chitchat.

"All right, Brad, this is it. Give me the money." I cock the pistol.

"That's a big gun," he says. "What caliber is it?"

"Forty-four," I tell him.

"Didn't that movie detective use one like that? You know the one."

"Dirty Harry," I say.

"Nah, that's not the one," he replies. "It was the other one . . . the little guy who always wore the rumpled coat."

"Columbo," I say.

"No," he says, very sure of himself, "not Columbo . . . but . . . give me a sec and I'll think of it."

"Whatever," I say.

"So how long *have* you been doing this?" he asks.

"Doing what?"

"Holdups."

"Why do you want to talk about that?"

"I'm just curious. It's not like I get robbed every day or anything."

"Not long. I haven't been doing it for very long." He'd probably keep asking me if I didn't answer.

"You have big medical bills or something? Maybe a sick little sister who needs a kidney transplant, only her HMO won't pay for it?"

"No, nothing like that. I was just bored with what I was doing."

"Which was?"

"I put those little pins in new shirts."

"No, seriously . . ."

"What I used to do doesn't really matter, does it? I think what I'm doing now, right now, is a little more important."

"I guess. Ever shot anyone?"

"Not yet."

It takes a moment, but Brad takes my meaning.

"I get ya, I get ya. So how many of these stickups have you pulled off?"

He's found my one point of real pride. "This is number three hundred and twenty."

"Wow," Brad says, shaking his head. "That's an awful lot—but should you be counting this one? I mean, since I haven't given you the money or anything?"

"Of course it counts," I retort. "I pointed my gun at you and demanded the store's money. Why wouldn't that count?"

"I dunno. I just thought . . ."

"Well, you thought wrong, didn't you?" He's getting to me, so I'm getting a little bit hotter under the collar than I should be.

"Sorry," he says, and I can tell he really means it.

I tell him it's all right, and we share kind of an awkward moment. Robber and robbee temporarily united in mutual forgiveness.

"Now, about the money," I say to him.

"Is that *all* this is about? Money?"

So much for forgiveness. He seems genuinely hurt, and I almost feel bad. "Well . . . yeah. Money is all it's about. It's all this has ever been about," I tell him. "Now, hand it over!"

Brad just stares at me, disappointed. But he does open the register and begins to fill a bag with the cash.

"I hope this makes you happy," he tells me as he slides the bag through the opening in the Plexiglas. I reach for the bag, but I hesitate. For some reason I feel guilty about taking the money.

"It's nothing personal, Brad," I try to explain. "If we met under different circumstances, I think we could be friends, but . . ."

I'm interrupted by about a dozen cops charging through the door, pointing their guns at me and shouting at me to drop my gun and get on the floor. Not wanting to get shot, I comply, and seconds later I'm cuffed. While I'm being led out of the store, I see good old Brad walk out from behind the counter and clip a shiny silver star on his belt.

"See ya, buddy!" he says cheerfully to me. I throw him a quick glance just as the door closes behind me.

"Why'd you guys take so long?" Brad asks as another cop walks up to a wall-mounted VCR I hadn't noticed.

"It was riveting television, man. We couldn't wait to see how it would end," the cop responds. He presses a button, and the screen goes to fuzz.

The courtroom lights come back on, and I can feel the eyes of the jury and everyone else in the courtroom on me. So much for my defense that it was all a big misunderstanding. □

FICTION

COMPASS ROSE

David Edgerley Gates



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/99

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“**A**nd a man shall be as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, as rivers of water in a dry place,” the preacher read from his text. He glanced across at the two mourners and shrugged his coat closer. The day was overcast, and there was a sharp wind. The other two men were better dressed for the weather. The preacher closed his prayer book and stepped back from the grave. “May the Lord bless you, and keep you, and make His face to shine upon you, both in this life and the life to come, now and forevermore.” He heard them murmur an amen.

There was no sexton for the little churchyard, and the preacher himself rode circuit, serving a number of small communities, none of them able to afford him a settled living. The two mourners had dug the grave that morning, although they were older men, not accustomed to stoop labor, and one of them had a game leg. The brief service over, they filled in the hole, stones and sandy soil rattling on the lid of the makeshift coffin. It had been carpentered from undressed planks, for want of better, and the corners buckled under the weight of the earth. Then it was covered from view.

“Did he have family, do you know?” the preacher asked.

“Back in Ohio or some such place as I recollect, but I misdoubt they were close,” the stout, shorter man said. He was leaning on the shovel, holding it much like a staff, but his efforts didn’t seem to have tired him particularly. “I’d imagine we made better provision.”

The preacher looked at the wind-scoured landscape around them and nodded. This corner of West Texas was a refuge to the kind of men who’d left family feeling behind them, for the most part, to stay one jump ahead of the law. The railroads and the automobile had worked mighty changes, but it was still a desolate spot, no more inviting than a penitent’s iron bed. The preacher sometimes questioned his calling.

The second man pressed a heavy coin into his hand. It was a twenty dollar gold piece, the preacher realized with a start. Better than a week’s wages to some. He felt slightly embarrassed by the transaction.

The shorter man read his doubts. “You can’t set a price on the Lord’s work,” he said, not unkindly.

The preacher thanked them both and took his leave. He was grateful, and puzzled. The two sturdy old men struck him as out of place. Not strangers to the country, exactly, but long absent from it, like a pair of returning prodigals. A part of him wondered if it were simple Christian charity that had brought them such a distance to bury a pauper.

She’d grown accustomed to the treachery of men. Treated with indifference, or casual cruelty, she’d learned over time not to trust their confidences or the occasional kindness. She traded on her looks until her looks were gone and her stock fell. She’d worked the cowtowns and the railheads, saloons and fancy hotels, but she wasn’t canny or skillful enough to rise above her

station, and her luck deserted her along with her youth. Now she was a two dollar whore, past fifty, with no prospects but a lonely end from consumption or venereal disease, another tarnished jade cast aside by Fate. She had none to call friend and took little comfort in religion.

Her given name was Sarah Bledsoe, but she was known as Fat Sally. She had a crib behind the stables for which the farrier collected a garnish on her earnings. Most of her custom came from soldiers at the army post four miles distant, but the troopers were paid but once a month and spent their money first on whisky. Nor was she the first in men's hearts. There were other women to service their needs, prettier, younger, clever and coquettish. Fat Sally was left with drunken doughboys too out of pocket to afford the better class of whore. She took the rougher trade and sometimes suffered for it. There was often vomit on her bed linen, and her body was seldom without bruises, or worse.

Somewhere she had a daughter, at least twenty by now but given up for adoption years before. Perhaps the girl had followed her into a life of degradation or been bound over to indenture or discovered escape in marriage only to find her husband brutish and weak. There was no way of knowing, but it was odds on that the girl's life was an improvement on her own.

Sally Bledsoe figured she'd played out her string. This sorry place would see the death of her.

The war in Europe was now a year old, but the United States had

yet to be drawn in. Wilson's reelection platform in 1916 was neutrality, avoiding an open breach with any of the belligerents, though anti-German sentiment ran high.

The president may have chosen not to take sides in the European war, but the revolt in Mexico was closer to home. All along the border country there were skirmishes between *federalistas* and undermanned army garrisons, and Texas Rangers had taken the field against guerrillas raiding on American soil, some of them no better than bandits. In the Big Bend patience was wearing thin. Vigilante reprisals were common. Ugly incidents had reached the papers back East.

Placido Geist knew the country was a tinderbox. He'd traveled to Olvidados with an apprehension of the risks, but he felt an obligation. After they buried the Dutchman in the windswept graveyard, he showed Spengler the letter. It had been franked a month and a half earlier and had taken more than half that time to reach him. By then the man who signed the letter was already dead.

"I didn't know the Dutchman could write so much as his own name," Spengler said, putting on his spectacles as he unfolded the crumpled sheet of foolscap.

Placido Geist didn't comment. His face had a secret, Indio cast. A lifetime of hunting dangerous men on both sides of the border had left its mark, or more particularly an absence, as if his flexibility of expression had been put aside in favor of a less demanding protocol, a

formal gravity that reflected his severe and deliberate temper.

Spengler sat back on the deal bench, straightening his leg. He'd been buckshot in the right knee years ago, an old wound that troubled him more with age. He was a former El Paso city marshal, prudent and shrewd but not entirely without delicacy. Placido Geist considered him a friend.

The cantina was a crude affair, low adobe walls and raw logs for rafters. Spengler drew the candle closer across the scarred table and examined the letter, taking his time. It wasn't the fist of an educated man, the coarse block printing a chore to parse. There was no salutation.

I NEVER ASK NO MAN A SERVICE (the letter read). THERE WAS A PRICE TO BE PAID FOR WHAT I DONE, AND I PAID IT. I MAKE NO APOLOGY, BUT I LEFT A CHILD BEHIND. SARAH BLEDSOE IS THE MOTHER. THE LAST I KNEW, SHE WAS IN LUBBOCK OR AMARILLO, BUT SHE MOVED SOME SINCE, AND I DONE LOST TRACK OF HER. I ATTACH NO BLAME TO SARAH. SHE MADE HER OWN WAY IN A HARD WORLD, WITH LITTLE ENOUGH TO SHOW FOR IT, AND MAY WELL HAVE ALREADY DEPARTED THIS LIFE. I FIGURE MY DAUGHTER IS A WOMAN GROWN HERSELF BY NOW, AND WOULD GO BY ANOTHER NAME, HAVING BEEN RAISED APART. I MADE SMALL PROVISION FOR HER IN THE PAST, BUT I HAVE LAID SOME MONEY BY, WHICH WAS HONEST GOT. I LOOK TO YOU TO SEE SHE GETS IT.

Spengler put the letter down and took off his glasses, rubbing the

bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Well, son of a bitch," he sighed.

"Not game I much care to flush," Placido Geist said.

"That girl could be anywhere, blown to the four quarters of the wind," Spengler said.

"A foundling, passed from hand to hand."

Their excuses were half-hearted, the ritual grumbling of men who knew better than to shirk an incumbency. Otto Maas, a.k.a. the Dutchman, had gone to prison for manslaughter half a lifetime previous, and Spengler and Placido Geist had put him there. There was never any doubt he'd killed the man, a low sort who'd needed killing, but there were extenuating circumstances, as there so often are. Placido Geist had always been of the opinion that an injustice was done and that he owed the Dutchman a reckoning. Now the debt had come due, the Devil to pay and no pitch hot.

"You never had children, I take it?" Spengler asked him.

Placido Geist was abashed by the question, his future wife having died at an early age and the baby she was carrying dead with her, but Spengler had no way of knowing that and certainly intended no malice. "He must have labored some over that letter," Placido Geist said, changing the subject.

Spengler nodded. "If he knew he was dying," he said.

"How not? He wouldn't have written it otherwise."

"Did he try to find her himself, do you know?"

Placido Geist shrugged. "He would have lacked the temperament, the skills, and the wherewithal," he said. "But he knew enough to leave it with us, more's the pity."

She'd been named Rose at birth, a pretty choice for a pretty infant, plump and baby-fragrant, with no foreknowledge of her thorny future.

A whore's child, she was treated as such, taunted early and often with the stigma of having been born on the wrong side of the blanket. Later she would be struck by the hypocrisy, but at the time she was wounded, nursing her isolation and her grievance. The orphanage in Veronica was run, efficiently and without religiosity, by a grass widow from the North Platte whose common-law husband had been a hardware drummer lured by the promise of quick riches in the Klondike goldfields nearly twenty years before, of whom nothing had been heard since. Mrs. Abercrombie no longer anticipated riches or rescue, and she taught her young charges likewise, not to rely on false promises but to depend on their own diligence alone. It was a well-established recipe, plain and reliable as short crust, spoiled only in being overhandled.

Rose grew to detest the Abercrombie recipe, no pie in the sky, and found it no proof against disappointments. She was a moody girl, cheerful and sullen by turns, but she did her assigned chores on schedule and learned her letters, and when at the age of nine she was farmed out to a childless Hutterite couple who owned a tannery

in Muleshoe, near the New Mexico line, she knew better than to complain. The work was smelly and arduous, the acids discolored her skin and blistered her hands, her foster parents were free with the strap but otherwise ungenerous, and she was altogether miserable.

Even a short time can seem very long to an unhappy child. Rose felt herself bound on the wheel. She ran away from the Hutterite couple after two months but was returned, fortuitously, to the care of Mrs. Abercrombie. Rose didn't consider it a stroke of luck, but then she was ignorant of other, worse possibilities. Placed in a series of foster homes over the next few years, Rose fit in with none of them. She wanted desperately to please, of course, to be taken in by someone kind, but the cards were stacked against her, and perhaps her need was too obvious, her desires too raw. She was labeled an incorrigible, thankless and spiteful. Her ungovernable nature simply testified to her tainted origins.

"The fruit doesn't fall far from the tree," the records clerk said with a wink of complicity.

Placido Geist was not a man to find wickedness in a child or look for blame in an accident of birth. He himself would have fathered a bastard had Amarita lived to bear his baby. He made no reply.

The clerk scanned the dogeared ledger, running his finger down the columns. The crabbed penmanship was awkward, with common words misspelled, but someone had at least taken pains to note the par-

ticalars of people's lives, their coming into this world and their taking leave of it. The ink had faded to a rusty tracing, so faint in places as to be almost illegible.

The clerk shook his head. There was nothing in the old book for the dates Placido Geist had given him. "Things weren't as efficient back then, you understand," he said to the aging bounty hunter somewhat condescendingly. "Nowadays we order our vital statistics with better utility."

Placido Geist was inclined to agree, after a fashion. He'd noticed one of the new noiseless typewriters on the desk behind the counter. But there was still something human and plaintive about the faded entries written years before with a steel-nibbed pen in that uncertain but earnest hand.

He thanked the clerk and left. Spengler was waiting for him across the square from the courthouse. The stairs would have given him trouble, and he'd found a spot on a bench in the shade of an elm, taken his place with the other old men who showed up regularly to share tobacco and swap lies. It was just above noon, the day making up cloudless and hot. The empty Texas sky was as blue as glazed china, so bright it hurt the eyes.

Placido Geist crossed the square into the shade of the tree. Spengler broke off the conversation he was having with one of the men on the bench and got heavily to his feet.

"This is beginning to look like a fool's errand," Placido Geist told him.

They had little enough to go on,

in truth, and it was a cold scent. They'd started in Lubbock and then taken the train north to Amarillo. In both places there was no record of a child born to Sarah Bledsoe, nor did they cut sign of a woman of Sarah's description after all this time. They turned south again, the two of them canvassing the country in between, asking at courthouses and county seats, looking up baptismal records, talking to retired lawmen, interviewing doctors and midwives, although they took for granted that many a woods colt had slipped through the cracks and the likelihood of attaching a name or a history to an unbranded stray was scant.

Spengler, however, looked pleased with himself. "I've got a line on Sarah," he said. "She was here in town not more than eight years ago, according to the courthouse gossips. They used to call her Fat Sally, but she owned to the name Bledsoe when she appeared before the local magistrate and admitted to maintaining a disorderly house. Not your better class of place, I don't suppose, but she was never the highest class of whore, either."

Placido Geist nodded thoughtfully. It was the first daylight they'd seen. "What was the disposition?" he asked.

"They assessed a stiff enough fine to get a lien against the property and put her out of business."

"I take it she moved on," Placido Geist said.

Spengler shrugged. "She didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, and none to go surety for her," he said. "The sanctimo-

nious bastards might just as well have turned her out naked."

"What's the nearest town of any size, somewhere she'd be able to pitch her tent for a quick return?"

"Buffalo Lake's a water station on the railway spur to Clovis," Spengler said. "She'd likely pick up some trade there, drovers and day labor, section hands. Not a rich vein to mine, but enough for a grubstake and her train passage."

"If that's the best we've got, we'd best get to it."

"I'm thinking that's exactly what Fat Sally Bledsoe told herself at the time," Spengler commented dryly.

"Beggars can't be choosers," Placido Geist said.

He was a cut above her usual line of custom, she could see that from his dress and manner, and a stranger to town, but a curiously faceless man without what a Wanted poster or a bench warrant would have described as distinguishing characteristics. Sally was a shrewd enough judge of men to sniff out the faint odor of menace about him, a shadow behind his quite ordinary features, something that hinted at the pursuit of a secret vice. In this, however, she was all too ready to accommodate him, since it raised her price to humor a favored peculiarity. Avarice stilled her caution. She took him behind the stables to her room.

He seemed almost apologetic when he killed her, as if it were a necessary but distasteful exercise and he took no pleasure in it. He did it with dispatch, breaking her

neck cleanly so as to cause her the least suffering, and Sally had not even time to wonder at the injustice of it. He'd given her no alarm, which he counted a blessing or she would have stiffened at his touch and struggled, making the business more difficult, but there had been no unseemly thrashing or disturbance. He took pride in the details, after all, an oddly clinical vanity that provided for his own safety as well. No one had seen them go off together, and when he left her in the soiled bedclothes, no one saw him walk away. If they had, he didn't have a face people remembered. It was an asset in his line of endeavor.

They had some rough country to cover, but Spengler found sitting a horse uncomfortable so they'd hired a trap. It was no luxury, all the same. The days' travel over poorly graded roads obviously did his bad knee no good, although Spengler made small complaint. It wasn't his way. He shared a litany of stubborn virtues with the old bounty hunter, neither of them given to bellyache or boast. Like other men of their generation, they were used to solitude and the silence of their own company, and doing for themselves. Spengler still rolled his own smokes, not having accustomed himself to buy tailor-mades. Granted, there was much to be said for the conveniences of the modern world, but not for the erosion of homely skills that attached to that convenience. To a man like Spengler or Placido Geist, born well before the turn of the century, the

novelties of the new age seemed confining, less a melioration than a shrinking horizon line, or perhaps the years had made them rigid and unforgiving. The qualities that had shaped them were no longer in demand, were in fact something of an embarrassment. They were both hopelessly out of fashion.

The more immediate difficulty was the physical distance they had to cover, retracing the steps of somebody several times removed from them in the past, a woman who'd left little enough impression on the ground she'd walked across—"No more footprint than a fly," as Spengler observed—and whose comings and goings went unremarked for the most part by the various other pilgrims she met in her passage.

They picked up her trail in Bufalo Lake, a slim trace it was agreed, without telling particulars but sufficient to lead them south to Nazareth and from there to Spade. A chance encounter sent them up Blackwater Draw to Ochiltree, once a cattle camp serving the Good-night-Loving Trail, but now a ghost town abandoned to the elements. They doubled back, bearing east toward the Salt Fork of the Brazos. The settlements were fewer, desolate and mean, each less prepossessing than the last, and the cribs more verminous as Sally slipped down the rungs of her profession. They ran an aging madam to earth who recalled mention of a daughter in the few confidences Sally shared with her, but the old bawd had no idea where or in what circumstances the girl had been left.

On their way north again, they

passed through Veronica, where it seemed convenient to stay the night before pushing on, and when they stabled the horse at the livery they were told of the late Mrs. Abercrombie. Had the sad event not still been fresh in people's minds, they wouldn't have heard about it at all, nor attached any significance to the story.

A woodframe house, it had burned to the ground, the old woman inside it. She was retired, of course, long past the age when she could handle the demands of children. A lucky thing that she lived alone, if unlucky for her. Such mishaps were all too common. The flue in the coal oil stove was faulty, most like, so the heat built up inside the walls before the fire kindled, and when it took light, the place went all at once, in a sudden burst like phosphor.

"An orphanage at one time, you say?" Placido Geist asked the liveryman, glancing sidelong at Spengler.

But whatever record of her charges Mrs. Abercrombie had kept were lost in the fire, they learned, and although they'd only just happened on her name and hadn't known to interview her, it was still an opportunity missed. They'd already left too many stones unturned.

Deliverance comes in unexpected guises, Rose discovered. She was fifteen when her pregnancy damned her for good and all. An arrangement was concluded, her keeper being nothing if not resourceful, and the unwanted child disposed of. Rose was discarded as well, her dis-

grace complete, to make her own way in the world.

Fortune favors the bold, it's been said, and Rose was enterprising enough to seize the occasion. Cast off, she was easy prey, she realized, but knew her own strengths, and she determined immediately not be taken advantage of. She hitched up with a confidence artist named Trotter, a fixture on the medicine show circuit, giving him to understand she would reward him with her favors in exchange for his protection. Trotter was satisfied with the bargain and all the more easily led, like most men, believing himself her master. He passed Rose off as his ward, given her age, so as not to outrage convention. She participated in the fiction while it suited her, and when it no longer did, some months later, she allowed a minister's wife in Bent Grass to force the secret from her gently, her glee masked by the pretense of shame. Trotter, not a complete fool, took to his heels and escaped a severe hiding or worse at the hands of the local vigilance committee, but he made his escape without money or means, Rose having expediently looted his cash box and possibles. She already had her eye on the next prize.

Bent Grass, the county seat, had been incorporated only nine years before with the coming of the railroad. The springs, which fed a branch of the upper Colorado, had been known to the Comanche and to buffalo hunters, and later to ranchers, before attracting farmers who planted cotton and grain. Chief among the stockmen was

Ansel Pym, who had settled the country in the early days, fighting Indians and rustlers and making good his claim on enormous holdings. Old Ansel was now well into his eighties, the tenacious relic of a notoriously bloodier time. His son Desmond had died of the cholera, but Des had left a son of his own, and Young Ansel was his grandfather's heir. The boy wasn't cut from the same cloth as the old man, being generally regarded as a spoiled brat, an indiscriminate womanizer with a vicious streak, but this estimation of his character was seldom voiced, Old Ansel not being a man to answer discourtesy with soft speech.

Rose had suffered herself to be taken under the wing of the minister and his wife. She knew of the younger Pym's prospects, as who in that windswept country didn't, and she arranged an introduction, seemingly in passing. They met at a church bazaar, Young Ansel forehandedly corralled into an appearance, grudging the need. The obverse of exercising his proprietary *droit du seigneur* was to live up to other, more boring feudal obligations. He enjoyed playing the mikado and dispensing favor but resented having to pretend to a common interest with dirt farmers. He usually oiled himself up as thoroughly as possible in anticipation of such dreary events, exhibiting a glazed and belligerent drunkenness as proof of his indifference. He was unprepared to be smitten by the lively young girl presented by the minister's wife and lost for a moment his natural arrogance.

Rose, just shy of sixteen, had flowered. She was both coltish and sly, with a lopsided smile that suggested doubtful innocence. Young Ansel felt the promise of heat and warmed to the task. For her part, Rose recognized the predator in him at first blush and was undeceived by his attentions. But she yielded to them, enough to keep her fish on the line and set the hook. She read him clearly enough to see that he was as wayward and unscrupulous as she was. He needed a touch of the spur, she thought to herself. With luck and the judicious exercise of cruelty, he could be brought to heel. It would take careful management, and she mustn't lose patience, but in the end she would be his wife, a fact as certain to her as that of her clouded birth. When her husband came into possession of his inheritance, she would assume her rightful mantle and become undisputed mistress of Pitchfork, richest *estancia* in the far reaches of West Texas, without the penalty of the past to haunt her.

It was three weeks now since they'd buried the Dutchman, and they felt no closer to finding his daughter than they had the day they filled in the grave.

"I'm inclined to think we've discharged any indemnity," Spengler said, easing his bulk wearily in the seat. "No fair man would reproach us for putting paid to this."

"No fair man," Placido Geist agreed. The dead don't play fair, he might have remarked. They saddle us with undertakings not easily requited. He gathered in the

reins and clucked at the spent horse, coaxing her to pick up her feet. They could make out the town across the dusty flats, some few miles distant in the dusk. It didn't look like much.

"Sorry excuse for a town," Spengler said, by way of conversation.

They'd made inquiries at the army post. Soldiers were on familiar terms with whores as a rule, but for some reason the troopers were surly and reticent, unwilling to say much.

"You get the feeling they weren't telling us something?" Spengler asked.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, Placido Geist thought, rehearsing the General Confession. There is no health in us.

"You're mighty pensive," Spengler said, rather put out.

"I was considering sin," Placido Geist said.

"You had much occasion for weaknesses of the flesh lately?" Spengler asked him.

Placido Geist smiled ruefully. "Gluttony, perhaps," he said.

Spengler straightened his leg. "You opine those soldier boys are ashamed of their carnal appetites?" he asked.

"Most men can be shamed," Placido Geist said.

Spengler was irritated with the bounty hunter's gnomish replies, which were more opaque than no answer at all. "Spit it out, damn you," he said. "Don't talk in riddles."

Placido Geist glanced over at

him, Spengler's vehemence taking him by surprise. He'd always thought the man taciturn and slow to rile, never sudden.

"Excuse me," Spengler said, ill at ease with his own unfocused anger and abashed at his sharp words.

"No injury meant," Placido Geist said.

Spengler sighed and massaged his sore knee. He'd taken to wearing lace-up brogues in recent years instead of the boots with under-slung heels he'd always favored in the past. The flat soles were easier on his feet than something made to fit a stirrup, now that he no longer rode with any facility or eagerness. "Few sins gall a man's pride more than his own presumption," he said, speaking as if to himself.

"Sometimes a man bites off more than he can chew," Placido Geist admitted. "We took on the Dutchman's endeavor because it suited us to think we had honest pretext."

Spengler nodded morosely. "And so far we've got nothing to show for our pains," he said. "Two old fools on a fool's errand as you called it. We figured to do our best, but our best hasn't been near good enough."

Placido Geist studied him unblinking. "Oh, for Christ's sake," Spengler muttered. "I never counted on becoming a garrulous bore, not if I lived past four score year and ten. I don't imagine you'd discourage me from keeping my thoughts private."

Placido Geist had left his own doubts unvoiced for the most part, but they were still distracting.

"There's nothing to be gained by denying the obvious," he observed.

"Or in anticipating setbacks," Spengler said.

"Let's see what we turn up," Placido Geist told him.

They paid a courtesy call at the jail. They found the constable on duty to be affable, but not, as Spengler put it afterwards, the sharpest knife in the drawer. There had been a recent murder, and the man was well beyond his depth. The victim was of no consequence, he was quick to relate, a woman of easy virtue, but the crime was disturbing in itself. The usual offenses were no more serious than disturbing the peace or creating a public nuisance, this last a euphemism for relieving one's bladder in plain view. Spengler and Placido Geist were sympathetic and asked the details, less from any real interest than out of a politic show of manners, and so learned of Sally Bledsoe's death. They were a day late and a dollar short.

She'd been buried in Boot Hill, without ceremony, and there was only a scuffed wooden marker sinking into the ground as the loose earth settled. Her name had been burned into the board with a shank of hot iron. It was misspelled BLED-SO. Below that was the present year. Some wit had added a crude caricature in bright yellow crayon underneath, a female stick figure with her legs spread, like the letter M. It was the only bit of color decorating the grave. Spengler knelt down awkwardly and scrubbed it out with the sleeve of his coat. Placido Geist helped him slowly to his feet again. Neither man met the other's eyes.

They walked back from the graveyard and stopped at the stables, thinking to examine the room out back that Sally had died in, but they didn't have much stomach for it. Nobody had taken notice of her absence, and she'd been dead two days in the heat before the stableman thought to look in on her. The smell still clung despite efforts to bleach it out, and the place was altogether cheap and forlorn in any case. They regarded it sadly from just beyond the open doorway, not stepping inside. Sally had lived a joyless and brutish life and died in like fashion. There was no remedy for it.

"This is a hard piece of luck," Spengler remarked.

"We seem to be getting more than our due," Placido Geist said to him, his cast of mind inward and speculative.

"We're not the only ones," Spengler said.

They looked at each other. They both knew the road they were going down, and they'd reached a fork.

"You're thinking about the woman who ran that orphanage, back in Veronica," Placido Geist said. "Burned to death."

"And now Sally," Spengler said. "Her neck broken. It's somewhat previous, considering we got a late start."

Placido Geist nodded. "Somebody's been over this ground before us," he said. "Covering the tracks."

The curiously faceless man had a name, which was Messenger. To others in the trade he was known as Handsome Andy, but it was some-

thing of a joke, so few people being acquainted with his features. There was no likeness of him to circulate, and descriptions of his appearance never tallied. He arranged his commissions through an intermediary, a lawyer in San Antonio who limited his practice to the repair of indiscretions large and small and sold his services dear. Messenger had been well paid for executing this assignment, the job requiring considerable legwork.

Now he sat on the verandah of a small transient hotel in Odessa, putting his thoughts in order. He was recently arrived from the town of Muleshoe, where he'd found nobody with any memory of the Hutterite couple who once owned a tannery there, using otherwise unwanted children as labor, bound over for the work of curing hides until they reached majority in exchange for coarse provender, an iron bedstead, hand-me-down clothes, and rudimentary schooling. Messenger admired the efficacy of the enterprise on the whole, but he was somewhat affronted by its complete shamelessness.

He was certainly no sentimentalist, however, and his sympathies, such as they were, lay in the present. He was giving careful reflection to the wording of a telegram, not a report to the attorney but a direct communication with the client. It was a breach of professional etiquette Messenger regretted, although it seemed the only sure way. He couldn't trust a third party.

BREEDING STOCK SECURED. ALL
OTHER BIDDERS OUT OF THE RUNNING.

WILL FORWARD NECESSARY DOCUMENTS FOR YOUR APPROVAL AND PROVIDE AUTHENTICATION.

He was amused by that last touch, a glancing blow, the silken whisper of threat suggesting there were damaging materials as yet to be delivered.

His attention wandered. The hotel was built pueblo-style out of stuccoed adobe brick, the cut ends of the heavy *vigas* projecting through the outer walls at parapet height. He noticed a line of tiny ants climbing the stucco, and looking closer he saw there were hundreds of them, an army in miniature marching up and down the wall. He couldn't imagine the generalship of such a campaign, the effort, the immeasurable distances, no end in sight. It put him in mind of Aztec pyramid builders, steadfast in their exalted mystery.

GO TO THE ANT, THOU SLUGGARD! No, he didn't like that. It wouldn't do to quote Scripture anyway, not under the circumstances. Keep it simple. Plain speaking, brisk and businesslike, the syntax uncluttered, four-square and serviceable as a handshake. SELLER READY TO DEAL. SUGGEST YOU MAKE SERIOUS OFFER. This was the tricky part, what price to name. Blackmail called for a delicate touch.

"What did the Dutchman die of?" Spengler asked. "I don't recall your saying."

"Pleurisy, I was told," Placido Geist said. "Prison did his lungs no benefit."

Spengler nodded. "Bad diet, penitentiary food."

"Rancid meat, no decent vegetables or fresh fruit. It's surprising he lasted as long as he did."

It was unlikely any suspicion would attach to the Dutchman's death, but it couldn't be altogether discounted. If there were a pattern to the other deaths, the Dutchman's came to look equally fortuitous.

"Do we have reason to believe Sally ever told anybody the name of the girl's father?" Placido Geist asked, thinking out loud.

"She told the Dutchman," Spengler said.

"It might have been a misguided kindness," Placido Geist remarked.

"How so?"

"A man serving a twenty year sentence for manslaughter would likely take comfort in knowing there was something left behind to remember him by," Placido Geist said.

"You presuppose this act of kindness to be Sally's."

Placido Geist looked at him in surprise. "A whore is no less Christian in her actions for being a whore," he said.

Spengler turned and gazed out the window of the railway coach, his thoughts intemperate. He didn't want them read on his face. "I meant no disparagement," he said gruffly.

Placido Geist let it pass. He had little wish to trespass on another man's privacy. His own thoughts were at odds with themselves, adrift on opposing currents.

"Would she have written him in prison, do you think?"

Placido Geist wondered about

that himself. "Prison mail is read and censored before being passed on," he said.

"There was no such letter in the Dutchman's effects."

"Unless someone took it, as convincing evidence."

Spengler was silent again. The scrub of the Llano Estacado rolled by beside the tracks, stunted piñon and juniper flattened into ungainly shapes by the scouring wind. Dust devils spun across the cracked earth, and sand hissed against the carriage windows, sifting in past the rattling transoms.

Who profits? Placido Geist asked himself.

The problem lay in assigning a motive. The one common thread was the orphan girl, passed from hand to hand with no surviving chronicle of her bumpy itinerary. The only person who knew the stages of her journey with any certainty was Sally's daughter herself if she were still alive, and that spurred his mind in a direction he jibed away from like a horse refusing the bit. He felt the Dutchman's charge, meant to redress an unredeemed wrong, had less auspiciously opened a can of worms. He realized it was a mistake to hold himself responsible for events he couldn't control—it was self-serving, in fact, an old man's immodesty—but he couldn't shake the notion that he and Spengler were somehow being used in the office of bellwether, a plough turning the soil, with the husbandman of death treading the furrows behind them. He tried to shrug off this fantastical presentiment, reminding him-

self that the Devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape, playing to our most favored conceits, but it unsettled him nonetheless. If they were the instrument of another, all unwitting, and yet managed to discover the girl's whereabouts through some coincidence or stroke of chance, they'd have led the assassin right to her.

"Pitchfork," Spengler said, breaking into his reverie.

They were traveling south from Lubbock to the junction at Big Spring, where they could board the through train to El Paso. The right-of-way cut across the northeast corner of the Pym spread, Old Ansel having granted an easement to the Rio Grande railroad and their assigns in return for a freight stop on his own land for shipping cattle. Feedlots flanked the sidings, platforms, and loading chutes built up next to the tracks. The famous boxed brand was burned into the fenceposts at regular intervals, as if there were any need to advertise ownership, the fortunes of the family being so widely known.

"They say the old man still rode out to check his stock, winter and summer," Spengler remarked.

Placido Geist nodded. "Died in a fall from his horse, I believe, a year or so back," he said.

"You knew him?"

"Knew of him," Placido Geist said. "How not?"

"I've heard the boy hasn't proved the old man's get, the blood thinner, two generations removed," Spengler said.

"A truant disposition by most reports."

"He married a girl of no family, it's said. Chaste but undowered. His grandfather can't have been pleased."

Placido Geist shook his head, smiling. "Ansel Pym had dynastic ambitions to be sure," he said. "Nor was he a man in any wise to be crossed. But in like manner he put little store by the good opinion of lesser mortals."

Spengler sighed. "You take too practical a view," he said. "And overly scrupulous. Why spoil a story for lack of the facts?"

"A fabrication can't be at odds with the facts," Placido Geist said. "Old Ansel judged a man by his worth, much the same way you look first at a horse's teeth, and he was no fool about horses, either. He wouldn't refuse his consent to such a marriage if the girl were of good character."

"And if she weren't?"

Placido Geist shrugged.

"The proof is in the pudding," he said. "The old man could have forbidden the match, but he didn't. It speaks for itself."

Spengler subsided. He would've gone on, volunteering instructive examples of many an honest rustic led to grief by some adventuress, like a calf to the gelding, but Placido Geist seemed to have lost interest. In this Spengler misread his man, as his speculations opened up the very train of argument the bounty hunter had avoided.

Who profits? he'd wondered. One possibility was all too plain. Sally's daughter might have risen in the world and left her past behind her, perhaps marrying a man of prop-

erty and reputation. But if that past were exposed, she risked losing all her gains. It was simple enough. Erase the evidence and the past became a blank book. She could write her own history, could make it eventful or unremarkable, whatever she desired, with no one to correct or accuse her, none to bear witness. If that meant murder, to burn yesterday's soiled pages to ashes and secure the present against mischief or reversal, then murder would be readily done. No longer a victim of circumstance but still hostage to fortune, she was only protecting her investment.

Rose Pym had never lacked for invention. She'd invented herself, after all. Marriage, she soon discovered, needed a steady diet of sham, or hers did anyway, so it didn't matter practically whether others had made a better bargain. She contrived a pregnancy early, which strengthened her position, but even before the boy Desmond was born, she found an ally in Old Ansel, who was by no means blind to his grandson's faults. The old man respected ambition, and recognizing it in Rose, he encouraged her to take on more of his own burden, reposing in her both his confidence and his authority. She was saddened by his death, as it meant she had to exercise that authority over both the ranch and her husband. While he was alive, the old man had kept Young Ansel's excesses in check, but with his grandfather dead, the new *patrón* demanded a submission from his retainers that the old man had earned and he had not. Like most

weaklings Ansel was a bully, and Rose knew the hands spoke of her husband behind his back with contempt. They called him *borracho*—drunkard—and made fun of his pretensions. Rose understood ridicule was dangerous. It made for bad discipline. She saw the men grow insolent and mutinous and knew their disdain for Ansel could rub off on her. She determined to win them over, realizing she'd set herself no easy task.

Leaving the infant Desmond in the care of his wet nurse, she embarked on her new enterprise. It meant rising early, wearing men's clothing, riding out in all seasons and in all weather, just as Old Ansel had done, making it her business to learn the men and equipment, the terrain, and the animals.

The great herds of beef no longer grazed on open range, but the fenced pasturage was enormous. She often slept in the saddle or on the ground and went days without a bath. She drank thick, scalding coffee at line camps, swallowed dust on the trail, went wet in sudden storms, and never complained for herself, always taking time to listen to complaints from the working cowboys. They humored her at first, thinking she only amused herself, and then came grudgingly to admire her interest and stamina.

Rose was careful not to undermine her husband, but inside six months it was common knowledge who held the reins. Ansel was tolerated, his habitual drunkenness blunting any interference with actual ranching, and the outfit recovered its self-respect. Rose signed the

contracts and managed the accounts, and she was regarded privately as Old Ansel's real legatee.

She had good reason to be proud, but she knew better than to court complacency. And despite her precautions, when true hazard presented itself, it came on her blind side.

"Well, the worm turns," a voice said familiarly.

She'd just stepped off the raised sidewalk and was about to mount the buckboard. He spoke from a little behind her and to the left. She glanced over her shoulder into the street. He had his back to the sun, and it took her a moment to recognize him. It was Trotter.

He lifted his hat and smiled at her politely, showing off his manners, but she didn't doubt the courtesy was ironic.

"I heard you'd done well for yourself," he said, moving slightly closer so as to speak quietly but not close enough to give offense. "I see I heard right." She could smell his mail-order cologne, thick and sweet, and the faint odor of naphtha on his woolen suit.

"Cat got your tongue?" he inquired provokingly.

Rose looked up at him with a steady and alert gaze, neither fearful nor shy. If anything, she was disappointed in him. This was no chance encounter.

Trotter dropped his eyes, at a loss. He'd obviously rehearsed himself, but he seemed to have forgotten his lines. She waited for him to gather his faculties. "The thought of tar and feathers doesn't improve a man's disposition," he told her.

"It might work wonders for your appearance," she said.

"You did me an injury," he said, with a flash of temper.

"You seem none the worse for wear."

Trotter stifled his anger. "I've a proposition I'd like to put to you," he said.

"I can well imagine," Rose said, her amusement bitter.

"Is there a place we could discuss it?"

"I have no wish to be seen with you," she said.

"You're making this disagreeable."

"How would it be otherwise?" she asked him. "Fine words butter no parsnips. Name your price and be done with it."

Her directness took him by surprise. He wanted to twist the knife a little. Rose wasn't having any. "I'm not going to stand out in the street, damn you," she said, fiercely. "Speak up or give way."

Trotter had been of two minds whether to approach her at all, but her intransigence decided him. He was not to be discarded like a failed suitor, he insisted, nor would he be satisfied with a token payment. He demanded a stipend, a set reward on a fixed schedule, mortgaging his silence.

Rose heard him out and agreed.

They came to an understanding that the money would be delivered by hand and in secret. Trotter was pleased with himself. He thought it a handsome accommodation, of mutual benefit. He said so.

Rose refused his pleasantries. This was no occasion for social

graces. She felt an urge to throw up.

Trotter looked up the street. With the railroad bringing in trade and disposable goods, Bent Grass was no longer a sleepy prairie cowtown but a place of opportunity, keeping pace with the changing times. Soon the rutted roadway would give way to pavement, the wooden storefronts to brick, the gas fixtures to electric. "This is a likely spot to stake a claim," Trotter remarked to Rose. "We could have both chosen less happily." He smiled like a conspirator.

She swallowed her rising gorge.

"Don't be a nuisance," she said. "You're unwelcome here, make no mistake. Whatever our commerce, we'll conclude it at a distance."

"I wouldn't leave it too long," he advised her.

"No," Rose told him. "I'll send someone."

And send someone she did.

"How many killings?" the judge asked.

"Who can say? Two that we know of, or anyway suspect. There might be a half dozen more." Placido Geist studied his whisky morosely, turning the glass between his hands. "Not that it matters much. There's little chance we can bring the murderer to book."

On his infrequent trips to Austin, Placido Geist always took the time to visit with Judge Lamar. They enjoyed each other's company and yarned together over a whisky or a game of chess. Placido Geist had told the story, and twice the judge had gone to the sideboard to refill

their glasses. Now that the meat of the tale was told, Lamar was chewing on the bones. Versed in the rules of evidence, he found the other man's argument unpersuasive legally, but experience told him the bounty hunter wouldn't chase a false scent.

"It's mostly smoke," Placido Geist said. "Everything at second-hand, gossip or hearsay, none of it solid."

"I take your point," the judge said, "although we're not in front of a jury."

"Even in Texas juries are loath to hang a woman."

Lamar shrugged. "The injustice was done that girl by her birth and no fault of her own," he said. "How do we know what other wrongs were done her, each following from the first? She's led a gypsy life."

Placido Geist smiled without humor. "Is this your line of defense?" he asked.

"Oh, it's wholly inadequate for a capital crime," Lamar said. "Then again, which of us is pure in heart?"

Placido Geist sketched the air with his hand, a gesture of acquiescence. "I admit my reasons are selfish," he told the judge. "I don't know the name she was born with or what name she goes by now. I doubt whether I could find her if I tried any harder. Nor am I dead certain that I'm right about this. It's too slippery to grasp."

"You'd like to be sure, one way or another."

"Every act has consequences, but not necessarily those we foresee," Placido Geist said. "I took the Dutchman's shilling in the hope I could lay his ghost to rest, but I succeed-

ed only in disturbing other ghosts out of the unquiet past. It does me no distinction."

"This is churlishness," Lamar said shortly.

Placido Geist was stung by the reproach, but he realized the judge hadn't intended a gratuitous insult.

"We all look for resolutions," Lamar said. "Something neat, a means of satisfaction, or even redemption. But that instinct runs counter to the rule of entropy, the natural reign of chaos. We try to impose order, discipline, a sense of fitness, because it suits our vanity to think we are the measure of destiny, that man is made in the image of God, with mastery over the brute forms of the earth and over our own narrative, as if history weren't messy, accidental, and arbitrary. You can't blame yourself for failing in a responsibility when there's no reckoning."

"Does that absolve us?" Placido Geist asked him.

Lamar snorted. "The mark of a criminal is not that he breaks the law but that he feels it doesn't apply to him and other men are fools not to simply take what they require or deserve," the judge said. "The criminal doesn't consider what's lost in the transaction. An outlaw, in the original sense, isn't just someone trying to escape penalty but a man who's placed himself beyond legal protection. There's your choice. An honest man owns up to his responsibilities not from fear of censure but because he understands the limits of the social compact. We accept this construct, this common fiction, as a convenience."

"You contradict yourself," Placido Geist told him. "You say on the one hand that man's endeavors are no more than a tissue of futility and on the other that we owe ourselves an accounting. Which do you believe?"

"Where's the contradiction?" Lamar asked. "I say only that this evident artifice keeps misrule at bay. Most of us have very little patience with ambiguity or mixed results. We like our answers straight, our oracles unclouded. We ask for a simple table of elements—earth, air, fire, water—or an easy calculus to explain the Furies that drive us."

"You make it too abstract," Placido Geist said.

"Very well," the judge said. "In plain English, that whore's child has slipped through your fingers. You have lost very few bounties over the years, a point of some pride, and this shabby business is left at loose ends."

"She'll cheat the noose," Placido Geist pointed out.

Lamar sighed. "She won't be the first, nor will she be the last," he said. "Any more than some innocent might stand in for her on the scaffold, and without prejudice."

The bounty hunter thought this rather a startling admission for a man retired from the bench, but he chose not to pursue it. In his time Lockjaw Lamar had sent more than a few men to the hangman, and if he'd doubted their guilt, this was the first Placido Geist had heard of it.

They set out the chess pieces, and their talk turned to other things. Politics, of course, a staple of Judge Lamar's discourse and the reason

he kept his residence in the state capital. Men they'd known, both good and bad, most of them dead now and the few still living a reminder of their own obstinate durability. The passing of time and the nature of memory. The changes that had overtaken both themselves and the country in a single lifetime.

It wasn't all old man's talk about the past by any means. The judge kept his ear to the ground and enjoyed a bit of current scandal.

There was a recent case in West Texas, a woman found in a hotel room with a man not her husband. Adultery was not at issue, as she'd shot him stone dead when he presumed on her virtue. She was handily acquitted of manslaughter at her trial, having a skillful lawyer and the sympathy of the jury on her side, and the fact that she was married to a man of considerable property did her no harm. The few questions that lingered after the verdict were put to rest by her obvious composure, startling in one so young.

"Mrs. Ansel Pym," Lamar told him in answer to his question. "Child chatelaine of Pitchfork."

"Ah," Placido Geist said. He remembered Spengler's comment about the girl. "Chaste but undowered."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. Who was the man in her hotel room?"

"The dead man was identified as one Messenger, a villain of some reputation," Lamar said.

Placido Geist nodded. "He was known as Handsome Andy," he said. "A jack of all trades, they say, but a proper brigand. I'd always

heard nobody knew what he looked like."

"Curiously enough, her lawyer did," the judge said. "He defended him years ago on a forgery charge."

"Did he get him off?" Placido Geist asked, smiling.

"Yes, he did. We're talking about Johnny Beauchamp out of San Antonio, a man who never takes the losing side."

"Speaking of villains of some reputation," Placido Geist remarked, without malice.

"The fellow's a scoundrel, no question," Lamar said. "I wonder he didn't employ Messenger himself in some capacity."

"If he had, the Pym woman did him a service," Placido Geist said. "Handsome Andy might have embarrassed any number of people had he ever been put in the witness box."

Lamar chuckled. "Dead men tell no tales," he said.

"I wonder what brought them together."

"Ranch business, or that was his pretext for meeting with her," the judge said. "Apparently she keeps

the pursestrings and wears the pants as well. Her husband is a hopeless drunk, not to put too fine a point on it."

"And she holds the prize," Placido Geist said.

Lamar put the chessmen back in position on the board. They'd won a game apiece. Lamar picked up a white pawn and a black one and put his hands behind his back.

Handsome Andy would have been there to sell, not buy, Placido Geist thought. He wasn't in the cattle business, and surely rape wasn't on his mind.

The judge held his clenched hands out, a pawn in each. The white pawn moved first.

The richest spread in West Texas, and now it was hers. He reached out and tapped Lamar's left hand. Lamar opened it and showed him the black pawn. Placido Geist sat forward. He'd be a move behind for the rest of the game, and he couldn't afford a mistake, not if he wanted to win.

Then again, he reasoned, neither could she.

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FICTION

THE LOVE BUGS WILL GET YOU IF YOU DON'T WATCH OUT

DeLoris Stanton Forbes



Illustration by Lizzie Snow

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/99

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In other parts of the country they are called March flies, but in Florida they are the love bugs. Hirsute black flies with red heads, they appear in randomly selected areas usually in May and again in September, exact arrival date uncertain. Adults fly slowly and always in pairs, hooked back to back or front to front, it's hard to tell which unless one is a naturalist/zoologist specializing in entomology, which Edison most certainly was not. His only concern with love bugs was the result of their flight paths. They flew only a few feet off the ground, and they often—very often—ended up as windshield spatter and hood ornaments of a particularly ugly design. Furthermore, if not removed ASAP, their body fluid could take the paint right off a car, be it a new department vehicle or Edison's own aged Mustang.

They appeared suddenly on May sixth, a sunny albeit still cool Sunday chosen because Edison was off duty from the Fairland Police Department and because Lena Little wanted to go see the manatees in Blue Springs Park.

"I understand that the mermaid legend has been traced to the manatee." Lena Little was from the north, Boston to be precise, and while Edison wasn't familiar with a great many Bostonians, he had formed the impression that they knew—or believed they knew—something about everything. He'd inherited Lena Little from his dear departed mother's side of the family; she was a third cousin twice removed, whatever that meant. Lena

had explained it, but after she had recited the family tree, how Great-grandfather Little and Great-grandmother Byson begat Lucius and Annabelle and Katherine and Daniel and Thomas, whom Edison recalled as his Grandfather Thomas Little who married his Grandmother Beatrice, a.k.a. Granny Bea, and who produced only one child, Edison's mother Ethel, who in turn married Edison's father, who sired one son, Benjamin—at that point Edison was totally lost and decided that he'd call Lena Cousin Lena and let it go at that.

Lena Little was in the neighborhood to decide whether the Fairland area was suitable for a Little family reunion, and since Edison was her only familial connection, she'd landed figuratively on his doorstep. So far he'd taken her (when time permitted) to Sea World and the Space Center; she'd done Disney on her own. Now she had read that the manatees were congregating at Blue Springs as they did when the inland waterways were still too cold. The waters at Blue Springs being relatively mild, the manatees moved in temporarily to chomp on aquatic vegetation and often to have their babies.

"Their proper name is *Trichechus manatus*." Lena was a retired schoolteacher, and she sounded like one. "They inhabit the waters from Florida to the West Indies and are a seriously endangered species. The female manatee gives birth to a single offspring each year and suckles it at the pectoral mammary glands, sometimes clasping it to the breast with a flipper." She

tapped the camera she wore around her neck. "I hope to get a picture of that. I've brought two rolls of film for the purpose. What on earth are those things flying around? One just squashed against your windshield. Oooh, there's another. Will they bite?"

"Their proper name," Edison could be as bookish as Cousin Lena when he put his mind to it, "is Bibionidae, and they do not bite. We call them love bugs. They are propagating right before your eyes." He watched her reaction to his fairly explicit explanation of the habits of the Bibionidae; she didn't so much as flicker an eyelash.

"Very interesting," she said dryly, so he asked her, "How do you like this part of Florida so far?"

"I'm still evaluating," said Cousin Lena Little.

En route to Orange City they passed a troop of motorcycle riders, so many that they took up half the road. "The Brigands, that's what it says on the back of their jackets. One of those notorious bike gangs?" Cousin Lena tutted a couple of tut-tuts. "I've read about those."

"I don't know the Brigands. No way of telling that they're trouble just by looking. Something happens to a guy—or gal—when she gets on a bike. Suddenly they look ominous, it must be the leather and the helmets. I've stopped some who turned out to be upstanding citizens, doctors and lawyers, even judges out for a more or less innocent adventure on the open road."

Cousin Lena went beyond tut-tut; this time she harrumphed. "Then again," Edison went on, "I've

caught up with at least one murder suspect on a Harley . . . Here we are, Blue Springs Park. How's the manatee population, ma'am?" The question was aimed at the admissions lady who took his four dollars.

"Last time I looked there were," was her answer. She smiled as she said it, but Edison felt she was mouthing the standard answer to an oft-asked question.

"Thanks," said Edison as he passed the proffered pamphlet to Lena and they drove in. The park was built around the St. Johns River lagoon where a seventy-two degree winter temperature lured the manatees from November through March. The waterway was edged with a high-railing boardwalk interspersed with viewing projections.

They found a parking spot without difficulty; they were, it seemed, among the early arrivals. Once out of the car, Edison gave it a cursory examination for love bug casualties. Most were on the grill and windshield. As for the others, there wasn't much he could do about them until he got his hands on a hose, so he hoped for the best.

Cousin Lena strode off to the boardwalk with Edison trailing in her wake. They looked out on the St. Johns stream through its riverside foliage: longleaf pine trees, fetterbushes, and saw-palmetto mingled along the banks, live oaks dripped Spanish moss, a picture postcard scene. "Very nice," said Cousin Lena. "Where are the manatees?"

"We'll walk along and watch," he

told her. "They're in here somewhere." It's not like Sea World, lady, he thought. He couldn't throw a fish into the water and start a feeding frenzy. For one thing, manatees were vegetarians.

"What bird is that? Some rare species?"

"A grackle, I think. Very common, I'm afraid. Look to your right, Lena, and just ahead. I think that's a manatee floating under that overhanging cabbage palm on the far side."

"Where? Where?" Camera at the ready, she lunged toward the railing. Long and lanky, Cousin Lena looked nothing like his mother had. She must take after the paternal side of her family, he thought.

"Over there, see? And up ahead there's a pair swimming this way."

"Where? Where? Oh! Oh, I see them. My goodness. But—they look just like big floating fish-shaped balloons. King-sized Beanie Babies! Just drifting like that. I want to see one up close. I want to see a manatee face—"

"We've come upon a whole school. There's a mother with her baby, see, right there. That ought to be a good photo . . . and some of them are coming closer to this side of the shore."

The sound from behind was loud and mood-breaking. He turned to look and saw what his ears had expected: the bikers had arrived. The bikers had invaded Blue Springs Park.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" squeaked Cousin Lena from railside.

"Yes, they're noisy, but they'll quiet down and we'll move along.

This is a big park, and there's much to see. Go on, Cousin Lena, there's bound to be more manatees around the bend."

"No, no, no! You can't. You can't go on. Look down! Look down, I tell you! If I'm not mistaken, that's a body. Down there—floating like the manatees!" It was just then that the vanguard of the pack of bike riders joined them on the observation platform.

And thus the fun began.

Edison went for help, finally located a park worker emptying trash baskets into a collection truck. He used his phone to call the park security office, and they came from all directions, some uniformed and one driving a golf cart, an older grayhaired man in civvies who turned out to be the bossman. While they removed the body from the river, he escorted Edison and Cousin Lena as well as the advance contingent of the Brigands up to the Thursby house, built in 1872 and now used, it seemed, as field headquarters.

"I'm John Harrison," announced the civvy-clad gent, "Who are you?"

The bikers were identified as Casey Evanston, Julio Cardoni, and Ellen Piper, respectively a Disney *sous-chef* on his day off, a self-employed auto mechanic, and a county librarian, Fairland branch. Edison had never run into Ellen Piper despite his many trips to the Fairland library, but maybe he just hadn't noticed her. She had pale blue eyes behind glasses and hard-to-say-what-color hair, make it blondish-beige. Cousin Lena proclaimed herself a visitor from Mass-

achusetts, and Ben showed his badge.

The interview was short and relatively sweet. Ben suspected its primary purpose was for future use, names and addresses just in case. Cousin Lena, body discoverer, gave a graphic account of her role. "I was studying the manatees, you see, and taking pictures when I realized the inert shape floating below me was not a manatee but quite another type of mammal, to wit, human. Female, I think, but I couldn't be sure. It's harder to tell these days. Am I correct?"

Harrison seemed interested in the photography aspect. "You've got pictures in that camera?"

"Yes. Of course." She sounded as though she'd like to add where else would they be.

"I'm going to have to confiscate the film," said Harrison holding out a hand.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I want your film. I'll have it developed and get the camera back to you."

"But it's a new roll of film. I've only taken eight or nine exposures." Lena clutched the camera closer to her chest.

"If you please," said Harrison, hand still extended, hand now snapping fingers.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Reluctantly she removed the camera strap from around her neck. "This is a fine way to treat visitors, innocent visitors I might add, completely innocent. I'll want a receipt for that, sir. And a replacement roll of film."

Harrison handed the camera to

one of his minions. "See to it," he ordered, and then, "That's all. Enjoy your visit to Blue Spring Park."

"The gall of that man," muttered Cousin Lena as they left the Thursby house. "Who is he, anyway? You are a police officer, Ben; he was merely a park civilian. I kept expecting you to put him in his place."

"Sorry, Cousin Lena." Ben moved aside to let the biking trio push past. They were traveling at a faster rate than Lena and Edison. "I suspect the park civilian is a senior member of the state police. At any rate, we're out of my jurisdiction, and you'll get your camera back, don't worry." He thought but didn't add, just when I can't say. "Ready for more manatee viewing?"

"Hmm, I don't think so. If I can't take pictures, my day is ruined."

"There's a concession stand. Maybe they'll have one of those throw-away cameras. Shall we give it a go?"

"I suppose so. But I'm still furious at that overbearing bureaucrat. I do believe I shall write a letter to the vice president. He's alert to problems in our national parks."

When she got her use-it-for-the-day camera and finally ceased and desisted with the complaints, Ben almost began to enjoy himself. The history of the area was spelled out on the info boards, how the Timucuan Indians lived there for hundreds of years, how their main culinary delicacy was snail from the sandbars, how the snail shells formed over time a massive mound on which the Thursby house was constructed by pioneer settlers. So many tourists came to Florida for

the beaches and the theme parks, but Ben had long felt they ended up with the short end of the stick. There was so much more to his home state. At least Cousin Lena was getting a native's-eye view.

Having done his duty by her (they'd ended the Blue Springs adventure with dinner at, of all places, a Boston Market—Cousin Lena's comment was "Boston my eye!"), Edison figured he was off the hook. Tour guiding was not his forte. The lady was scheduled to fly away home on Tuesday and had refused his offer of a drive to the airport. She'd paid in advance for a return trip by van, and by golly, she was going to get what she paid for. Edison bade her goodbye, wondered if he was supposed to give her a familial farewell hug or even a kiss, settled for a handshake. "Y'all come again," he said. "Anytime."

"I just might do that," was her response. "I am still considering a family reunion here. Even though we did end up with a mysterious body. Do you suppose she was murdered and thrown into the springs? Do let me know what happens. And do pester that Harrison man until you get my camera back. I'd hate to sue the state to recover private property." Her slate-colored eyes were sparkling at the thought. Cousin Lena, thought Edison, you're a voyeur and just possibly an agitator.

But back at work at the hour Cousin Lena should be winging her way north, she called him. "They won't let me go," she said without prelude. "They say I'm a material witness."

"Witness? To what?" asked Edi-

son. "Who says? Who won't let you go?"

"Somebody from the state's attorney's office. They caught me as I was checking out. I have to stay around until I've given my deposition, and now I have to reschedule my return trip, which isn't easy, and I've checked out of my room and they say I can't move back in because they're all filled up for the next week. There's some kind of big convention, and most of the hotels are completely booked. What am I going to do, Ben? You've got to tell me."

"Hold it, now hold it. Deposition? They want a deposition relating to the discovery of a drowning victim? I know, different counties, different procedures, but it sounds like they suspect the woman was a murder victim. How did they come up with that? An autopsy, of course, but so soon? Here in Fairland it sometimes takes days. Who was the woman? How did she die? How come they haven't been here to see me?"

George, looking over from his desk, said, "If I'm not mistaken, they're here now."

Edison followed his glance. A uniformed state trooper filled their office doorway in both directions. "Which one of you's Edison?" he asked, and when Ben said yo, he handed him a subpoena.

"Hey." Ben held up a delaying hand. "You're working on a homicide? What's the story?"

The trooper shrugged. "Snake-bit," he said, "that's the word. That's all I know." And he left.

"What was that?" Lena, still on the phone, shrilled in his ear.

Ben told her. "Snakebitten?" she said. "I'm terrified of snakes. Absolutely petrified. But how does that make it a murder? I mean, snakes just do their thing, don't they?"

"I don't know, I'll find out," Ben promised. "Listen—" he took a deep breath "—why don't you come over to my place in, say," he checked his watch, "maybe an hour. We'll figure out the next move. If worse comes to worst, you can stay a night or two with me."

George made a noise and rolled his eyes. Ben leaned a free elbow on his desk and sank his chin in his hand. When she'd hung up, he said, "What else could I do? Huh? What *else* could I do? I've got to run home and take care of some things, George. I ought to be back in an hour and a half, something like that. Hold the fort for me, will you? Tell Briggs I'm out—" he glanced down at a report in his typewriter "—checking on gun vendors for this Pensky case. In case he's looking for me." He pushed his chair back, dug for his car keys. "That woman! I knew she was bad news the first time I laid eyes on her."

"I feel for you," said his partner. "I hope she doesn't stay too long—you know what they say about guests and fish."

"I know." George and his clichés. "They both smell after three days."

A quick survey of his condo made him groan. There were dishes in the sink from last night—and from the day before and maybe even the day before that. He ran hot water into the sink, added a glob of green Palmolive liquid, added too much, the suds ran over the sides on the

sink and down the front of the cabinet. He swore at it and swiped with a dish towel.

Where was the woman going to sleep? Edison was a one-bedroom tenant. His king-sized bed suited him just fine, and maybe there were times when it held two but this certainly would not be one of those times. He looked into the living room and shook his head. The sofa was on the elderly side, springs getting weak, and sure as the devil he was going to have to sack out on it, damn!

He sighed and went to work with the vacuum cleaner. Problem number one was that he hadn't emptied the bag since God knew when and couldn't find a new bag, so it was a matter of a lick and a promise as his mother used to say. As for dusting, that was a flick and hope for the best, damn, there was the doorbell, Cousin Lena had arrived.

He tried to ignore her curious glances (he could read judgment in her eyes) and showed her the bedroom. At least the bed was made and with clean sheets, too; he'd had time to do that. "I apologize," he said, "for my bachelor brand of housekeeping. I think you'll find some empty hangers in the closet, but I haven't had a chance to empty a bureau drawer . . ."

"That's all right." Could it be that she was secretly smiling—of course, patronizing sympathy, poor boy, what can you expect? "I'll live out of my suitcase. It shouldn't be that long, should it? Merely a matter of a day or two? You haven't heard anything about my camera, have you?"

"I'm going to contact Harrison as soon as I get back to the office. Sorry I can't offer you better accommodations."

"And I'm sorry to be such an inconvenience. You run along. You'll be home about what—sixish? We'll talk then."

"I'll call, I'll let you know. There's stuff in the fridge, I think. Cokes and beer and . . . no, no milk, I use the powdered cream for coffee, you'll find that in the cupboard . . . maybe I'd better show you."

"You run along. I'll find what I need, I assure you." And she virtually pushed him out the door.

As happy to get rid of him as he was to go, he mused. Well, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Like she said, a couple of days, they'd take her deposition and that would be that . . . Snakebite, so? Why would a snakebite point to murder? It was spring and Florida had its share of snakes and they came out in the spring like the love bugs and probably for the same reasons . . .

"The lab identified the snake venom," Harrison told him. "It was from a cobra. An Indian cobra, and by Indian I mean East Indian, not exactly your common everyday Florida type of reptile like rattler or even coral. Those you could figure she might have met up with by accident but a cobra . . ."

"She? Has she got a name?"

"We're still working on that. Checking fingerprints with the FBI, working with local dentists. You know, Edison, you could be a big help in this investigation. Seeing as you were on the scene. I've put a request in to your boss for a

loan of personnel, meaning you. Soon as he says okay, I need you to get your tail on up here. I've asked for an open-ended transfer. Bring an overnight grip along; it looks like this might take some time."

Cousin Lena, it's been good to know ya . . . "Hey, while I've got you on the pipe. Lena Little is bugging me for her camera."

There was a pause and then, "Oh yeah. I guess that's still at the lab. I'll see what I can do to put a tracer on it. I'll be expecting you later this afternoon. Get in touch with me at Blue Springs, the gal at the ticket booth will know where to find me."

Chief Briggs gave reluctant permission. "I don't know how you manage to get mixed up in some kind of homicide everywhere you go," he grumbled.

Cousin Lena took his reassignment in good stride. "I'll be just fine," she told him. "I'll rent a car, and I've already found a convenient little store for groceries just down the street but their stock is limited so I'll scout out a Publix or Winn-Dixie, they're your big chains, aren't they? And I trust you'll keep in close touch—by the way, what about my camera?"

By pure accident Lena had captured the floating body up close and in full color, Harrison had a blownup copy of the picture taped on a bulletin board. Ben studied the face. Young. He guessed early twenties. Blonde-haired, lots of long blonde hair. Built on the scrawny side, wearing some kind of dark garment. Harrison said it was a dress,

a full-length dress with long sleeves. In the photograph her eyes were closed so it was impossible to tell the color. She looked peaceful as she floated by, face up. Face up? Was that usual? There was something called a dead man's float, wasn't that face down? Ben didn't know. He hadn't been a water baby, growing up as he had in a sandy pine stand. Oh, he could swim all right, but he'd learned in a YMCA pool, he'd never surfed, never wanted to. He wondered how the girl's body had found its way into Blue Springs. From the ocean to the St. Johns—how did that work? He needed instant info from somebody he didn't have to fill in on his reasons . . . he'd better call Tommy Mott. Anything about the Atlantic coast of Florida, he'd know. He hadn't talked to Tommy Mott in years, but right off he'd know Ben Edison.

F. Thomas Mott, Attorney-at-Law, that's the way he was listed in the Yellow Pages, but to Ben he was Tommy, BMOC in the ninth grade. When everybody else was worrying about adolescent pimples and making it with the girls and moving into the tenth grade, Tommy was riding down to Sebastian Inlet on his vintage (even then) Harley with a surfboard sticking up in a jury-rigged sidecar. Cool had been the word for Tommy. His female peers gave him the cold shoulder but watched him out of the corners of their eyes. Rumor was that he'd made out with half the senior girls, and nobody thought he'd ever get a high school diploma let alone a college degree.

But somebody figured something

had to be done (not his dad, he was a grownup Tommy, so it was probably his mother, who came from a pretty respectable family), and Tommy abruptly disappeared from the local scene and soon became a memory, a kind of legend as a stud surfer-biker. Only to surface years later from some school up north as a suave stranger in a Boss suit driving a Lexus. The kind of law Tommy practiced was, to Ben's mind, akin to ambulance chasing ("The insurance companies have lawyers on their side, why shouldn't you?" Not that there was anything wrong with that, to quote *Seinfeld*.), but he looked really good in his TV ads, and seemed to be doing very well.

"I need to know something," said Ben when he'd reached F. Thomas. "How do the manatees get into the St. Johns River from the ocean?"

"How do the manatees—genius, old boy, you've got to be kidding me." F. Thomas Mott sounded a lot like the old Tommy. Even then he'd had a baritone voice; it was just a shade deeper all these years later.

"I'm dead serious. Literally. I'm investigating a possible homicide up here in Volusia County."

"Yeah? Who's the victim? What's the venue? Tell me about it."

Ben sighed. He could imagine what was coming. "It's this body found in Blue Springs park . . ."

"Oh yeah. I saw something about it. How come you're in on that? It's out of your jurisdiction, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but I was one of those who found it."

"Is that so? Hmm. Tell me all about it, Ben. It sounds—interesting." Ben could hear little wheels

going around, a suit against Blue Springs? F. Thomas Mott against the state of Florida? Hmm. "Tell me more."

"There isn't any more. Not yet. All I need to know is how the manatees get in there. From the river."

"Ah. Well." Ben could almost see Tommy settle back in his leather chair (had to be leather, probably wine-colored leather, Tommy was a wine leather kind of guy). "Manatees are natives of the West Indies, you know, but some of them are more adventurous than others and those make their way up here. There was even one that swam to Chesapeake Sound a few years back, remember that? Anyway, they make their way to Florida from the Caribbean, and they find that the Atlantic gets on the frigid side come winter so they start seeking warmth and they find power plants. Power plants, as you know, produce warm water, so the manatees locate the mouth of the St. Johns up Jacksonville way and they come on down the river until they find where the power plants' warm water spews out of a spring into the river. It comes through a hole in the lime rock from the Florida aquifer . . . do you recall that bones thought to be ten thousand years old were found in a spring near Port Charlotte?"

"Tommy," Ben broke in, "all I want to know is where the body could have entered the St. Johns and wound up in Blue Springs, that's all. From Jax or Palatka or maybe even Sanford or Osceola?" He hoped he'd kept his tone civil; wind up a lawyer, he thought, and they'll run on forever.

"Well, that should be obvious," said Tommy. He sounded just the least bit put out. "The answer is no way. The body had to be put into the Blue Springs, probably weighted down with something that broke loose. That's the only way a body could get there. The only way. On-the-spot disposal."

"Hmm." Ben doodled in his open notebook. His manatee sketch wasn't entirely recognizable. "You're sure?"

"I'm positive. Hey, man, it's good to talk to you after all these years, but I'm really kind of busy here right now. Why don't you check with some of your scientific experts, they'll tell you. And call me back later, we'll do lunch."

"Yeah. Well, I'm sure you're right, and I appreciate it, Tommy. I really do. How do you think the Gators are going to do this fall, and what do you think about the Magic . . ." Ben was talking to an open phone line, which was just as well. Thinking back, he recalled that he and Tommy had had a confrontation in the ninth grade over the affections of one Elly Sue Mercer. He'd completely forgotten until now. He didn't even remember who won. Maybe Tommy did. Maybe not.

We'll do lunch! Hah!

Ben reported his findings to Harrison, who grunted and sent a pair of divers into the springs. They came up with shreds of heavy paper with all-but-illegible words printed on them. Put together, they spelled out parts of a brand name and its product, cement. Harrison conclud-

ed she must have been weighted down with two fifty-pound bags of dry cement, which when mixed with spring water could have conceivably kept a body under water for as long as the famous bones of Port Charlotte. But it hadn't. Somehow the body had come loose and floated to the top just in time for Cousin Lena's memorable visit. Question one—how did the body get there?—was probably solved, Ben noted. Somebody put it there. An old saying floated into his head: ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer.

Question two was not so simple. Who was she?

She hadn't been fingerprinted while she lived. There was no record of her prints at any law enforcement office in the state nor at the FBI databank in Washington. Her teeth were her own, and she must have had a more than adequate supply of calcium because she had no fillings. Nada. Maybe she never saw a dentist; none had any record of seeing her.

According to the pathologist, she was a Caucasian female approximately twenty-five years of age. She had at some time in her life given birth. Her height was estimated at five feet eight inches, her weight was one hundred twenty pounds. Her hair was blonde with darker roots, obviously touched up for color. Naturally blonde? Hard to tell, Harrison shrugged off the question. Her eyes were blue. Bright blue. Seeing her face with those bright blue eyes was unnerving. Ben had to look away. Medical tests being complete, she'd been prepared for burial (where and when?) but was

being held for possible I.D. A photographer took a series of pictures, and the best one was printed in the newspapers; another showed up on all the TV stations. "Somebody's got to recognize this girl," said Harrison grimly.

Somebody did.

Edison, in charge of the photo distribution, sent copies to national as well as state search organizations. In Fairland he would have sent the picture out to popular businesses for window displays—"Do You Know This Woman?"—but at Blue Springs he was manpower impaired so it ended up that he personally tried to cover beauty salons in a thirty mile area. She lightened her hair, a nice way of saying she dyed it. Did she dye it herself or had it been done for her, that was the question. And if the latter, how to find the dyer; as Willie Shakespeare had said, there's the rub.

He lucked out on the third day. It was a home-based shop on a side street in Deltona—Ben had nearly passed it by. The small crudely lettered sign hanging on the front porch eave caught his eye: ROSIE'S SALON, it said (actually it said ROSIE'S SALOON with the second O crossed out), and he thought, well, why not. No luck anywhere, don't break the string, man, go for broke. He walked up on the porch, heard voices.

Looking through the screen door, he saw a woman combing at the sopping hair of another woman, spotted a third woman sitting under a dryer getting her head baked. Professional hairdryers always made Ben think of some kind of

strange insect from another planet dining on partially ingested females. He rapped on the door frame, causing the combing woman to turn around. "Come in," she said. "I can cut your hair in ten minutes, honey. Soon as I get Della here rolled up."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I'm not here for a haircut." Once inside, he could smell the chemical smell that he'd been told came from permanent wave solutions. He held out the picture.

The combing woman looked him over while she wiped her hands on a towel. "Well, you could sure use a haircut, honey," was her comment as she accepted the photo.

Her wet-headed client tried to see what she was looking at. "What is it, Rosie? Another begging letter?"

"Have you ever seen this woman?" asked Edison. Listening to himself he could tell he'd given up hope of a yes answer.

"Let me see," insisted Della-of-the-wet-hair. "Hey, isn't that the Bell girl? Looks kind of like her."

"Oh, I don't know." Rosie, the beautician, was doubtful. "It looks kind of like her, but I'm not sure. It's not a very good picture. She's a pretty girl but she looks—funny."

"Let me see." The woman under the hairdryer had escaped her alien insect and stood to receive the picture. "Well, sure, that's Thelma. Gosh, Rosie, looks like she sure needs a touchup."

"Thelma Bell?" asked Edison.

"Yeah, I guess. That's why I wasn't sure, her hair should be a lot lighter. But she hasn't been in for a dog's age." Rosie studied the pic-

ture this time. She held it out to Edison. "That's her. No doubt about it. What's she done?"

He ignored the question. "Does she live around here?"

"She did," said Della.

"I think she took off with one of those bikers," said the hairdryer victim.

"Really?" Rosie was interested. "I hadn't heard that."

"They tell me those bikers lead some kind of wild life." Ben found a seat, made himself comfortable. "I do believe I'll have that haircut, Ms. Rosie. Now that you say I need one. You ladies wouldn't happen to know the name of that biker, would you?"

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Rosie. "A cop, huh? I thought so."

"How could you tell that, Rosie?" asked Della. "You are so perceptive."

"Oh, I could tell he was the law." The dryee sat back in her chair. "Anybody could."

Rosie gave her an annoyed glance. "So what's she been up to, Thelma Bell?"

"Getting herself killed," Ben told them.

Somewhere he'd read a phrase that went, "Little gossip, blithe and hale, tattling many a broken tale." He thought of it now. Their faces were alive with interest; they were ready to dine like gluttons on anything he could tell them so they could disperse "little gossip, blithe and hale." He told them the bare facts about Thelma Bell's demise and then demanded, "So, ladies, it's your civic duty. Tell me anything you know about Thelma Bell. Anything at all. Beginning with this biker."

"Well . . ." Rosie went back to tending to Della's hair. "She wasn't raised here, she was kind of new to the area . . ."

"Heck, Rosie—" the hairdryer woman had stayed out of her machine, this was too good to miss "—half the town is new to the area, all those houses they're building . . ."

"All I know is he wasn't any ordinary biker." Della-the-know-it-all jerked her head to look at Ben; to Rosie she said, "Sorry, Rosie. He didn't always show up on a motorcycle, sometimes he came in a fancy car—what kind was it? Let me think. I'm not good with cars any more, they've all begun to look alike except for the really pricey ones and the Cadillac always looks like a Cadillac, I don't know how they do that. One of those foreign cars, that's what Joe said. Joe's my neighbor on the other side, he said the guy was driving a Porsha. I said, well whoop-de-do, looks like Thelma has got herself a catch, and Joe said, I don't know, I think he belongs to one of those religious cults . . ."

Rosie and Ms. Dryer asked simultaneously, "Religious cult?"

"Where can I find your neighbor Joe?" Ben had his notebook at the ready.

"Oh, Joe works at the Texaco out on 17-92. I guess you'd find him there now, he works the late shift. I don't know what kind of religious cult he was talking about. Thelma was on the close-mouthed side if you recall; she never volunteered anything when she came here. It was all I could do to get her to tell me she was a single lady. I don't even know what she did for a living. I

mean, everybody's got to do something, right? Hey, I thought you were going to wait for a haircut. I'll be through with Della in a few minutes."

"Sorry, ma'am. Some other time. Thanks!" They were all three watching out the screen door as he drove away. Don't worry, he thought, you'll hear all about it on TV.

Joe was on duty at the pumps at the Texaco station, which still operated on the outdated theory that people like to be waited on. He was in his early sixties maybe, and the light in his eyes burned with a low wattage, but when Ben brought up the subject of cars, something hit the switch and Joe had plenty to say.

"Sure, I remember that guy. Looked like a movie star, you know what I mean. The Porsche was a '98 model, champagne colored. I guess that's what they call that kind of tan, champagne colored. And the bike was a Harley. I couldn't tell whether it was this year's or last, but it had one of those toothed rubber belts from the engine to the rear wheel 'stead of a chain or a driveshaft like they used to have, you know what I mean. When he showed up in the Porsche, the girl would get in just like everybody else, but when he showed up on the bike, she'd hop up on the back like any female biker even though she had that long dress on."

"Long dress?"

"Yeah, long dress. What was she? A Mormon or one of those Shakers or one of those—what do they call 'em?—Soyals that operate out of Cassadega."

"You didn't happen to get the Porsche's license plate number, did you?" Soyals. A new one to Ben, maybe Harrison could come up with some info on that one.

"I noticed it, kinda. It was one of those save-the-manatee plates, I noticed that, but I didn't think much about it to tell you the truth. I was more interested in the car, you know what I mean? That is some sweet baby. You don't see many of them around here."

"About the girl, anything you can tell me about her? Anything unusual? Other than the long dress—but I guess a lot of girls wear long dresses these days. Nothing special about that."

Joe frowned in thought. "Not what you'd call unusual. She made stuff she sold at craft shows. Baskets. And bowls, pottery I guess they call it, you know what I mean."

"At craft shows? Any craft show in particular?"

"Let's see, where did I run into her? Someplace around here, I don't go to a lot of those things. Oh yeah. It must have been Zellwood. Last year at the corn festival. That's where I spotted her. She was with a bunch of other women in those same long dresses selling stuff. That's about all I know about her, fella. I don't even know her name, to tell you the truth. Hey, here's a customer driving in, gotta go. Hang around if you need anything else."

I need a lot of things, thought Ben, but he had enough to go on. "Thanks," he said. "See you around." Driving away, he thought he should have gotten gas while he was there,

his tank was getting low. Two missed opportunities, a haircut and a tank of gas. But a save-the-manatees Porsche, a possible religious group called the Soyals, and most important of all, a name for Miss X. And twilight was coming on as he drove, and he thought of how he'd spent his time, how he always spent his time, looking for answers. Answers that sometimes came and sometimes never came. . . . "The gaudy, babbling and remorseful day is crept into the bosom of the sea . . ." Good grief, Edison, you're getting maudlin.

He found a message to call George when he got back. "The chief's been asking, says he hasn't heard from you. When are you coming back? We've had a wifebeating that turned into a wifekilling and a shop-owner shooting, we could use your know-how, man."

"Have you still got your bike, George? I haven't seen it lately."

"My Yamaha? Sure. I've been thinking of trading it in for a Harley, but I haven't gotten around to it."

"Ever heard of a gang named the Brigands?"

"The Brigands? Yeah. I think so. They're out of Lake Helen, I think. Somewhere around there. I don't know much about them, they're kind of lonesome-cowboy types. You getting bike fever? I can let you have my Yamaha cheap."

"I want you to hop on it and mix in with the Brigands. I'm looking for a biker who drives a Porsche with a manatee tag when he's not on his Harley. I'll get Harrison to clear it with Briggs."

"Aw, he'll never do it. Like I said, we've got these two homicides, and I haven't even mentioned the break-ins and the ATM thefts. They're stealing them like they was wearin' take-me signs."

"It won't take long," Edison promised.

"Yeah? You've got it nailed?"

"Close to. I need to scout the Soyals and go to the library." He heard George saying, "The what?" when he hung up.

Cassadega had a town center. It consisted of a sprawling hotel (once painted pink, now colored canned-salmon), a nondenominational meeting house, and a combination bookstore and gift shop. Ben debated, hotel or bookshop? He'd try the hotel first.

The woman behind the desk had squinty eyes and chapped lips.

"Soyals?" she said. "I dunno. Ask Melba. At the bookstore. She knows everybody. I just work here."

Melba was a tall Nordic type with true blonde hair and pale blue eyes, eyes that seemed to be seeing far beyond Edison. "Soyals? They make pottery. We sell some of their pieces; you'll find them over in that window display. Very nice work. All done by hand."

"Do you know a Thelma Bell? She's a potter. A Soyol potter, I hear. I saw some of her work at Zellwood last year . . ."

Melba brought her attention back from wherever it was. "It's possible. Let's look, shall we? The pieces are signed . . . oh yes. Here's one of hers, this basin, very nice, don't you think? You could use it for—oh, a great many things, it's nice

and big. Magazines perhaps, in front of the fireplace, or pinecones, that would be attractive, don't you think?"

"Kind of pricey, isn't it?" A hundred bucks. For a big bowl with a few unidentifiable fish painted on it and—was that, yeah, a manatee. But no snakes.

Melba looked huffy. "Well, it *is* a large made-by-hand original work of art," she sniffed.

Ben surprised her and himself. "I'll take it," he said. "Do you take MasterCard?" And as she was wrapping it up, "I'd like to meet the artist. Where does she hang out?"

Melba resumed her seeing-into-the-future stance. "The Soyals are like gypsies, always on the move. If you'll leave your name, I'll tell her you'd like to meet her. If she comes in."

"Never mind. It was just a whim. Tell me, are they into some kind of snake worship? I've heard a rumor . . ."

A shutter clicked in Melba's far-off focus, signaling some kind of closure. "Snakes? I don't think so, Benjamin Edison," said Melba, reading his credit card charge. "I'll tell Thelma you're interested. It's no trouble. Artists like to meet their admirers. So I'll tell her—if she comes in."

"Yeah," said Ben picking up his package, "you do that. If she comes in."

The Fairland County Library was open until eight P.M. on Fridays, and Ben got in just under the wire. Maybe Ellen Piper wasn't even on duty. He'd take the chance anyway, he thought, because this—

so far—had been his lucky day. And there she was behind the checkout counter running a library card through the computer, registering a pair of books to a blue-jeaned teenager who looked like a juvenile delinquent but whose reading tastes ran to a Faulkner trilogy and *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. Ben had long believed that a person's bookcase told more about the individual than all the question-and-answer sessions put on tape.

He'd liked to have seen Ellen Piper's home library. In lieu of that, he introduced himself and inquired if there was a place where they could talk.

Ellen Piper's eyes, weak-tea colored eyes, blinked behind her thickish glasses. "Talk?" She glanced behind her at a wall clock. "We're closing in five minutes. I don't think . . ."

"We'll go someplace for a drink." She blinked rapidly. "A coffee?" Edison corrected himself. "It's rather important. I'd like to ask you about Thelma Bell." There was a throat clearing behind him, and he turned to see two—no, three—potential book borrowers awaiting attention. "I'll wait for you just outside the door. Okay?"

A flurry of blinking was followed by a nod, and he moved out of the way.

He waited and waited and had begun to wonder if she'd ducked out on him when she finally appeared. She'd combed at her mouse-colored hair and put faint color on her lips. My God, thought Edison, maybe she thinks we've got a date.

"You look kind of familiar," she

said as they awaited service in the only downtown diner. Fairland was a roll-up-the-sidewalks town on Saturday night: all the revelers went elsewhere on weekends.

"We've met," he said. "At Blue Springs park. When Thelma Bell's body turned up."

She waited until the counter girl had placed coffee mugs in front of them to say, "Oh yes. You're the policeman. Is that who she was? Nobody's said. Wasn't your wife with you?"

"My cousin. My visiting cousin. You didn't recognize Thelma Bell? You'd seen her before. Hadn't you?"

She looked down as she spooned sugar into her coffee. "I don't think so."

Ellen was no expert liar.

"Well, no matter. Listen, the reason I wanted to talk was because I'm interested in getting into biking. Tell me about the Brigands. Is it a big group? Do they take newcomers? Could I go along on a weekend, check it out?"

She studied his expression. "You have a bike?"

"Well, no. Not at the moment. I can get one. Or I can ride in the rumble seat."

"Rumble seat? Oh, I see. We don't do much of that." She ducked back into her coffee cup. That cup ought to be about empty by now, Ben thought.

"No? I see lots of guys with gals hanging on the back. Looks like a good deal. You mean, gals can go sidesaddle but not guys? Or you just don't like my looks?"

That caught her attention. "No, it's not . . . you're a policeman."

"You mean no cops allowed? But you've got judges and lawyers, I know some of them."

She shook her head. She really had a problem meeting his eyes; now she concentrated on the napkin dispenser. "I don't know. I'd have to ask."

"Who would you have to ask? You got a boss biker? Well, sure, that makes sense. Every group has an organizer, has to have one to get things moving. Who runs the Brigands? I'll ask him myself."

She was getting ready to run. She had one foot out from under the table even now. "No, no, I'll ask him. We go Saturday, I'll let you know before then." She was standing, reaching for her shoulderbag.

"You know how to reach me?" He put a hand on its strap.

"Yes, yes. The police station. I'll leave a message at the police station."

"What's my name?"

"I... I should remember... I was going to ask..."

"Ben Edison," he told her. "Detective Ben Edison. That's who I am. But you don't need to call, I'll be seeing you before then. I've got to come into the library. To find a book about snakes. Cobra snakes." And he took his hand off the strap and watched her flee. Flee was the correct word, she was nearly running.

F. Tommy's answering machine took Ben's message: "Looking for a meeting tomorrow, do I need to make an appointment? It's kind of important. I'll just drop in about ten and hope you have a minute. Subject at hand, the Brigands. See you in the A.M. Your old pal, Ben."

Then, as long as he was in Fairland, he thought he'd pay Cousin Lena a quick visit. Damn! He'd forgotten to check on her camera again, she'd be all over him, but still...

"My goodness, you must have ESP," was her greeting. "I'm going home tomorrow, won't you be glad?"

He couldn't bring himself to deny it, so he tried to think of something pretty to say. "I brought you a present, a going-home present," and he proffered the Thelma Bell bowl. "It was created by a local artist, handmade and hand-painted. I hope you like it."

"My goodness," she said again, and he could swear her eyes grew moist. She removed the bowl from the bag and examined it. In the bright light of his overhead kitchen light it didn't look quite so mysterious, so out-of-the-world. Maybe she wouldn't like it. If not, he'd be happy to have it back, he'd taken quite a fancy to it.

"It's absolutely beautiful," she said and kissed his cheek. Ben was certain he blushed.

"I'll mail your camera to you," he promised, and she said, "Oh, you don't know? The camera was delivered to me this morning, all intact with a three-pack of new film. So that's all taken care of."

"Great." Something smelled good in the area of the stove. Maybe his nostrils had flared at the odor because Lena said, "I was about to have dinner. Have you eaten?"

"Well, no."

"It's baked salmon," she said, "and potatoes au gratin. Will you join me?"

"It will be a pleasure," said Ben,

and it was, and while he was there, George called with a report on the Brigands that was almost as good as Lena's homemade lemon pie.

The office of F. Thomas Mott might be that of an unaffiliated lawyer who eked out a living by representing insurance claimants attracted by TV ads, but it didn't look like one. The rooms were large, the walls were paneled, and the carpet (pale green) was lush. The receptionist/secretary was a sleek-haired brunette with pale pink fingernails and a dulcet tone.

Yes, she allowed, Mr. Mott had received Mr. Edison's message and would see him shortly, please sit down. Ben did and picked up a magazine, a *National Geographic* only two years old dealing with the Amazon. He looked for a mention of cobras, but his search was fruitless. There was an ample supply of *Cosmopolitan* and *House and Garden* magazines. These were provided, Ben assumed, for female clients needing solace of one kind or another. "Follow the Secret Rules of the Orient on How to Hold Your Man" . . . Ben was somewhat curious about the secret rules, but before he could get into it, Tommy was ready to see him.

"Ben! You haven't changed a bit since our twentieth reunion."

Tommy hadn't changed much either. There was a little silver edging along the hairline, but he still had the body of an avid surfer.

Ben settled himself into the visitor's chair, a highbacked, wooden-armed, leather (not red leather but forest green) throne fit for a queen perhaps, while Tommy took his

seat in the king's version across an expanse of polished mahogany. "How's it going?" Ben asked. "You haven't gone and got yourself married again, have you? I saw Darlene the other day; she still looks beautiful. Too bad it didn't work out for you two."

"It's a shame, a crying shame. Darlene's a nice person, you know, Ben. Too good for me probably, I guess that was the problem. I'm still that wacky bike-riding guy, reckon I'll never grow up. Peter Pan in a lawyer's suit. So what did you set up this meeting for? What can I do for you?"

Edison took a leap into possibility. "I need a little info about snakes. Cobras in particular. Seems to me I heard you own one, so I thought I'd come to the source. Snakes give me the heebie-jeebies, to tell you the truth. What's the attraction?"

Tommy narrowed his gaze. His eyes were green in color, but sometimes they looked almost tawny; they did that now. "Chester? His name is Chester, he's a spectacled cobra, do you know what a spectacled cobra is?"

Edison shook his head.

"They say the spectacled cobra wears Buddha's fingerprints. When his hood is extended, he seems to have eyes on either side of his head, i.e., spectacles. Chester comes straight from Sri Lanka. If you'll come out to my place, you can see for yourself. He's a beauty."

Another head shake from Ben. "But what's the charm? It must take a lot of special care, feeding it, keeping it warm. Does it have a lit-

terbox like a cat? I hear snakes shed their skins every so often. Does it do that, and how do you handle it? I can't imagine why anyone would want to have a snake as a pet, and yet I read about it almost every day ..."

Tommy leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head. "I can't speak for others, but for me it's a thrill. I don't get many thrills any more, but I get a surge every time Chester comes out of his basket and flares his hood and I see those eyes." He brought his hands down and smiled the famous Tommy grin. Edison could easily couple that with, "Would you like to see my pet Chester, Thelma? We'll go up to my place and have a drink and Chester will do his little dance for you." Carrying a body on the back of a bike was surely easier than a surfboard ... especially in the very early hours when there was no one to see.

"You belong to the Brigands, right? They were out at the Springs when we found that girl's body a week ago. But I didn't see you."

"I heard about that. Terrible thing. No, I had to miss that trip. I ate something I shouldn't have and got the runs. Not the thing to have when you're out on a bike, right?" And he sat looking expectantly at Edison. His expression said, "Well, I got by that. Now, what else?"

Ben rose. "Thanks for the info. If you hear anything about cobras that got away—you know the girl died from a snakebite, don't you?—let me know, will you. And my best to ... " Ben couldn't think of anybody to send his best to other than, "Chester." Going out the door he said, "Nice set of wheels you've got, Tommy. Is it true what they say about Porsches, that they cost an arm and a leg every time you need a minor repair?"

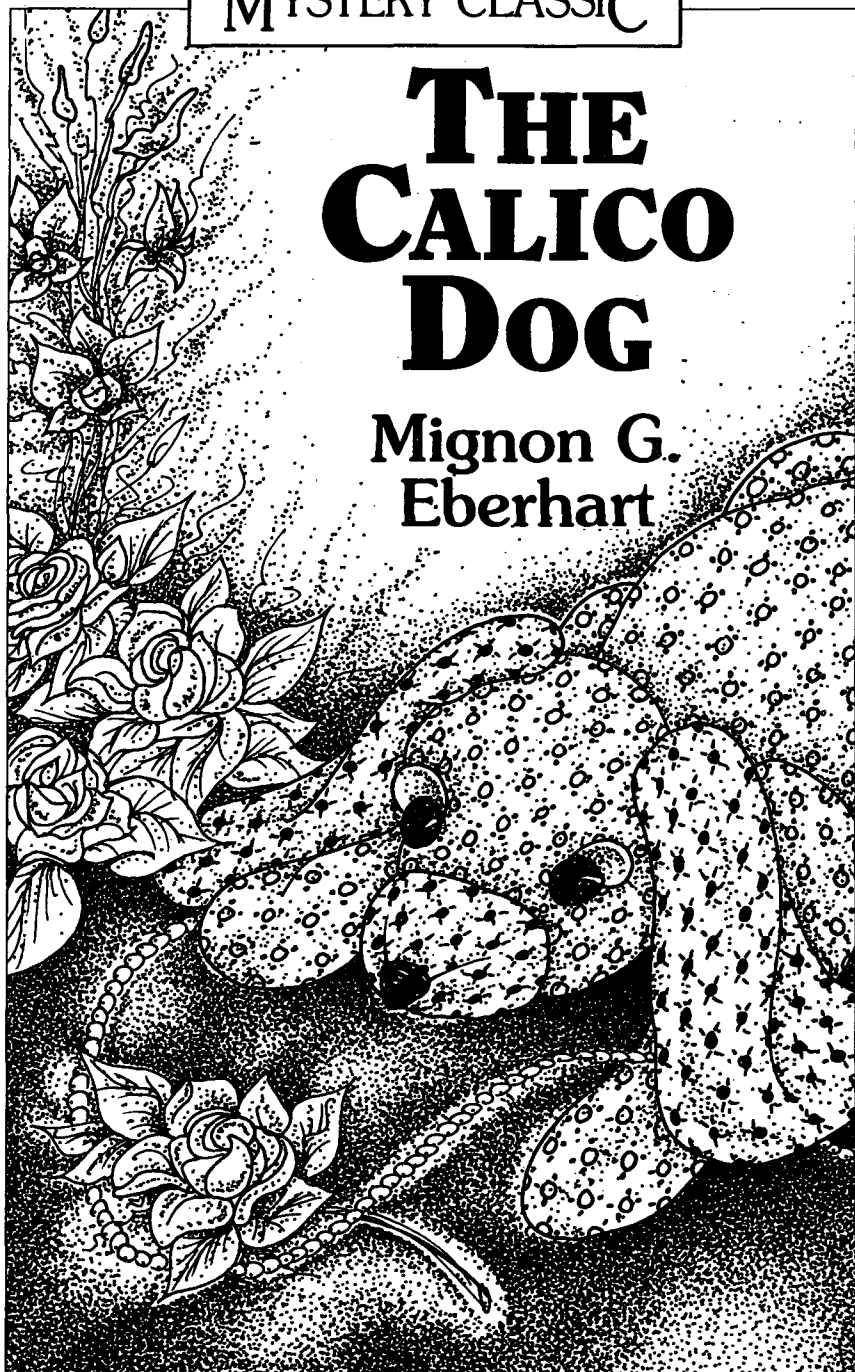
"Ah, you know how that stuff is—more rumor than fact. It's a great car, for my money. Greta's her name. I have this tendency to name things. Kind of silly, but like I say, I'm still a kid at heart."

Out in his own going-on-ancient Mustang, Edison looked up at F. Thomas Mott's windows. He wasn't certain, but he thought he saw somebody peering out. When he looked more intently, there was no one. How am I going to prove it, Tommy? he thought. He sighed. Only one thing to do that he knew of. He'd have to woo—ugly word!—woo Ellen Piper, that was all there was to it. Maybe she wouldn't be quite so unattractive if he could talk her into contact lenses, and he wondered as he drove out of the parking lot what Rosie over in Deltona could do with Ellen Piper's mousy hair ...

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE CALICO DOG

Mignon G.
Eberhart



It was nothing short of an invitation to murder.

"You don't mean to say," Susan Dare said in a small voice, "that both of them—*both* of them are living here?"

Idabelle Lasher—Mrs. Jeremiah Lasher, that is, widow of the patent medicine emperor who died last year (resisting, it is said, his own medicine to the end with the strangest vehemence)—Idabelle Lasher turned large pale blue eyes upon Susan and sighed and said:

"Why, yes. There was nothing else to do. I can't turn my own boy out into the world."

Susan took a long breath. "Always assuming," she said, "that one of them is your own boy."

"Oh, there's no doubt about that, Miss Dare," said Idabelle Lasher simply.

"Let me see," Susan said, "if I have this straight. Your son Derek was lost twenty years ago. Recently he has returned. Rather, two of him has returned."

Mrs. Lasher was leaning forward, tears in her large pale eyes. "Miss Dare," she said, "one of them must be my son. I need him so much."

Her large blandness, her artificiality, the padded ease and softness of her life dropped away before the earnestness and honesty of that brief statement. She was all at once pathetic—no, it was on a larger scale; she was tragic in her need for her child.

"And besides," she said suddenly and with an odd naïveté, "besides, there's all that money. Thirty million."

"*Thirty*—" began Susan and stopped. It was simply not comprehensible. Half a million, yes; even a million. But thirty million!

"But if you can't tell, yourself, which of the two young men is your son, how can I? And with so much money involved—"

"That's just it," said Mrs. Lasher, leaning forward earnestly again. "I'm sure that Papa would have wanted me to be perfectly sure. The last thing he said to me was to warn me. 'Watch out for yourself, Idabelle,' he said. 'People will be after your money. Impostors.'"

"But I don't see how I can help you," Susan repeated firmly.

"You *must* help me," said Mrs. Lasher. "Christabel Frame told me about you. She said you wrote mystery stories and were the only woman who could help me, and that you were right here in Chicago."

Her handkerchief poised, she waited with childlike anxiety to see if the name of Christabel Frame had its expected weight with Susan. But it was not altogether the name of one of her most loved friends that influenced Susan. It was the childlike appeal on the part of this woman.

"How do you feel about the two claimants?" she said. "Do you feel more strongly attracted to one than to the other?"

"That's just the trouble," said Idabelle Lasher. "I like them both."

"Let me have the whole story again, won't you? Try to tell it quite definitely, just as things occurred."

Mrs. Lasher put her handkerchief away and sat up briskly.

"Well," she began. "It was like this. . . ." Two months ago a young man called Dixon March had called on her; he had not gone to her lawyer, he had come to see her. And he had told her a very straight story.

"You must remember something of the story—oh but of course you couldn't. You're far too young. And then, too, we weren't as rich as we are now, when little Derek disappeared. He was four at the time. And his nursemaid disappeared at the same time, and I always thought, Miss Dare, that it was the nursemaid who stole him."

"Ransom?" asked Susan.

"No. That was the queer part of it. There never was any attempt to demand ransom. I always felt the nursemaid simply wanted him for herself—she was a very peculiar woman."

Susan brought her gently back to the present.

"So Dixon March is this claimant's name?"

"Yes. That's another thing. It seemed so likely to me that he could remember his name—Derek and perhaps in saying Derek in his baby way, the people at the orphanage thought it was Dixon he was trying to say, so they called him Dixon. The only trouble is—"

"Yes," said Susan as Idabelle Lasher's blue eyes wavered and became troubled.

"Well, you see, the other young man, the other Derek—well, his name is Duane. You see?"

Susan felt a little dizzy.

"Just what is Dixon's story?"

"He said that he was taken in at an orphanage at the age of six. That he vaguely remembers a woman, dark, with a mole on her chin, which is an exact description of the nursemaid. Of course we've had the orphanage records examined, but there's nothing conclusive and no way to identify the woman; she died—under the name of Sarah Gant, which wasn't the nursemaid's name—and she was very poor. A social worker simply arranged for the child's entrance into the orphanage."

"What makes him think he is your son, then?"

"Well, it's this way. He grew up and made as much as he could of the education they gave him and actually was making a nice thing with a construction company when he got to looking into his . . . his origins, he said—and an account of the description of our Derek, the dates, the fact that he could discover nothing of the woman, Sarah Gant, previous to her life in Ottawa—"

"Ottawa?"

"Yes. That was where he came from. The other one, Duane, from New Orleans. And the fact that, as Dixon remembered her, she looked very

much like the newspaper pictures of the nursemaid, suggested the possibility that he was our lost child."

"So, on the evidence of corresponding dates and the likeness of the woman who was caring for him before he was taken to the orphanage, he comes to you, claiming to be your son. A year after your husband died."

"Yes, and—well—" Mrs. Lasher flushed pinkly. "There are some things he can remember."

"Things—such as what?"

"The the green curtains in the nursery. There were green curtains in the nursery. And a—a calico dog. And—and a few other things. The lawyers say that isn't conclusive. But I think it's very important that he remembers the calico dog."

"You've had lawyers looking into his claims."

"Oh dear, yes," said Mrs. Lasher. "Exhaustively."

"But can't they trace Sarah Gant?"

"Nothing conclusive, Miss Dare."

"His physical appearance?" suggested Susan.

"Miss Dare," said Mrs. Lasher. "My Derek was blond with gray eyes. He had no marks of any kind. His teeth were still his baby teeth. Any fair young man with gray eyes might be my son. And both these men—either of these men—might be Derek. I've looked long and wearily, searching every feature and every expression for a likeness to my boy. It is equally there—and not there. I feel sure that one of them is my son. I am absolutely sure that he has—has come home."

"But you don't know which one?" said Susan softly.

"I don't know which one," said Idabelle Lasher. "But one of them is Derek." She turned suddenly and walked heavily to a window. Her pale green gown of soft crepe trailed behind her, its hem touching a priceless thin rug that ought to have been in a museum. Behind her, against the gray wall, hung a small Mauve, exquisite. Twenty-one stories below, traffic flowed unceasingly along Lake Shore Drive.

"One of them must be an impostor," Idabelle Lasher was saying presently in a choked voice.

"Is Dixon certain he is your son?"

"He says only that he thinks so. But since Duane has come, too, he is more—more positive—"

"Duane, of course." The rivalry of the two young men must be rather terrible. Susan had a fleeting glimpse again of what it might mean: one of them certainly an impostor, both impostors, perhaps, struggling over Idabelle Lasher's affections and her fortune. The thought opened, really, quite appalling and horrid vistas. "What is Duane's story?" asked Susan.

"That's what makes it so queer, Miss Dare. Duane's story—is—well, it is exactly the same."

Susan stared at her wide green back, cushiony and bulgy in spite of the finest corseting that money could obtain.

"You don't mean exactly the same!" she cried.

"Exactly," the woman turned and faced her. "Exactly the same, Miss Dare, except for the names and places. The name of the woman in Duane's case was Mary Miller, the orphanage was in New Orleans, he was going to art school here in Chicago when—when, he says, just as Dixon said—he began to be more and more interested in his parentage and began investigating. And he too remembers things, little things from his babyhood and our house that only Derek could remember."

"Wait, Mrs. Lasher," said Susan, grasping at something firm. "Any servant, any of your friends, would know these details also."

Mrs. Lasher's pale, big eyes became more prominent.

"You mean, of course, a conspiracy. The lawyers have talked nothing else. But, Miss Dare, they authenticated everything possible to authenticate in both statements. I know what has happened to the few servants we had—all, that is, except the nursemaid. And we don't have many close friends, Miss Dare. Not since there was so much money. And none of them—none of them would do this."

"But both young men can't be Derek," said Susan desperately. She clutched at common sense again and said, "How soon after your husband's death did Dixon arrive?"

"Ten months."

"And Duane?"

"Three months after Dixon."

"And they are both living here with you now?"

"Yes." She nodded toward the end of the long room. "They are in the library now."

"Together?" said Susan irresistibly.

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Lasher. "Playing cribbage."

"I suppose you and your lawyers have tried every possible test?"

"Everything, Miss Dare."

"You have no fingerprints of the baby?"

"No. That was before fingerprints were so important. We tried blood tests, of course. But they are of the same type."

"Resemblances to you or your husband?"

"You'll see for yourself at dinner tonight, Miss Dare. You will help me?" Susan sighed. "Yes," she said.

The bedroom to which Mrs. Lasher herself took Susan was done in the French manner with much taffeta, inlaid satinwood, and laced cushions. It was very large and overwhelmingly magnificent, and gilt mirrors reflected Susan's small brown figure in unending vistas.

Susan thanked fate that the only dinner gown she had brought was a new and handsome one, and felt very awed and faintly dissolute in a

great, sunken, black marble pool that she wouldn't have dared call a tub. After all, reflected Susan, finding that she could almost swim a stroke or two, thirty million was thirty million.

She got into a white chiffon dress with silver and green at the waist and was stooping in a froth of white flounces to secure the straps of her flat-heeled silver sandals when Mrs. Lasher knocked.

"It's Derek's baby things," she said in a whisper and with a glance over her fat white shoulder. "Let's move a little farther from the door."

They sat down on a cushioned chaise longue, and between them, incongruous against the suave cream satin, Idabelle Lasher spread out certain small objects, touching them lingeringly.

"His little suit—he looked so sweet in yellow. Some pictures. A pink plush teddy bear. His little nursery school reports—he was already in nursery school, Miss Dare, prekindergarten, you know. It was in an experimental stage then, and so interesting. And the calico dog, Miss Dare."

She stopped there, and Susan looked at the faded, flabby calico dog held so tenderly in those fat diamonded hands. She felt suddenly a wave of cold anger toward the man who was not Derek and who must know that he was not Derek. She took the pictures eagerly.

But they were only pictures. One at about two, made by a photographer, a round baby face without features that were at all distinctive. Two or three pictures of a little boy playing, squinting against the sun.

"Has anyone else seen these things?"

"You mean either of the two boys—either Dixon or Duane? No, Miss Dare."

"Has anyone at all seen them? Servants? Friends?"

Idabelle's blue eyes became vague and clouded.

"Long ago, perhaps," she said. "Oh, many, many years ago. But they've been in the safe in my bedroom for years. Before that in a locked closet."

"How long have they been in the safe?"

"Since we bought this apartment. Ten—no, twelve years."

"And no one—there's never been anything like an attempted robbery of that safe?"

"Never. No, Miss Dare. There's no possible way for either Dixon or Duane to know of the contents of this box except from memory."

"And Dixon remembers the calico dog?"

"Yes." The prominent blue eyes wavered again, and Mrs. Lasher rose and walked toward the door. She paused then and looked at Susan again. "And Duane remembers the teddy bear and described it to me," she said definitely and went away.

There was a touch of comedy about it, and, like all comedy, it overlay tragedy.

Left to herself, Susan studied the pictures again thoughtfully. The

nursery school reports, written out in beautiful "vertical" handwriting. *Music*: A good ear. *Memory*: Very good. *Adaptability*: Very good. *Sociability*: Inclined to shyness. *Rhythm*: Poor (advise skipping games at home). *Conduct*: (this varied; with at least once a suggestive blank and once a somewhat terse remark to the effect that there had been considerable disturbance during the half hours devoted to naps and a strong suggestion that Derek was at the bottom of it). Susan smiled there and began to like baby Derek. And it was just then that she found the first indication of an identifying trait. And that was after the heading *Games*. One report said: Quick. Another said: Mentally quick but does not coordinate muscles well. And a third said, definitely pinning the thing down: Tendency to use left hand, which we are endeavoring to correct.

Tendency to use left hand. An inborn tendency, cropping out again and again all through life. In those days, of course, it had been rigidly corrected—thereby inducing all manner of ills, according to more recent trends of education. But was it ever altogether conquered?

Presently Susan put the things in the box again and went to Mrs. Lasher's room. And Susan had the somewhat dubious satisfaction of watching Mrs. Lasher open a delicate ivory panel that disclosed a very utilitarian steel safe set in the wall behind it and place the box securely in the safe. "Did you find anything that will be of help?" asked Mrs. Lasher, closing the panel.

"I don't know," said Susan. "I'm afraid there's nothing very certain. Do Dixon and Duane know why I am here?"

"No," said Mrs. Lasher, revealing unexpected cunning. "I told them you were a dear friend of Christabel's. And that you were very much interested in their—my—our situation. We talk it over, you know, very frankly, Miss Dare. The boys are as anxious as I am to discover the truth of it."

Again, thought Susan, feeling baffled, as the true Derek would be. She followed Mrs. Lasher toward the drawing room again, prepared heartily to dislike both men.

But the man sipping a cocktail in the doorway of the library was much too old to be either Dixon or Duane.

"Major Briggs," said Mrs. Lasher. "Christabel's friend Susan, Tom." She turned to Susan. "Major Tom Briggs is our closest friend. He was like a brother to my husband and has been to me."

"Never a brother," said Major Briggs with an air of gallantry. "Say, rather, an admirer. So this is Christabel's little friend." He put down his cocktail glass and bowed and took Susan's hand only a fraction too tenderly. Then Mrs. Lasher drifted across the room where Susan was aware of two pairs of black shoulders rising to greet her, and Major Briggs said beamingly, "How happy we are to have you with us, my dear. I suppose Idabelle has told you of our—our problem."

He was about Susan's height; white-haired, rather puffy under the eyes, and a bit too pink, with hands that were inclined to shake. He adjusted his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, then let them drop the length of their black ribbon and said, "What do you think of it, my dear?"

"I don't know," said Susan. "What do you think?"

"Well, my dear, it's a bit difficult, you know. When Idabelle herself doesn't know. When the most rigid—yes, the most rigid and searching investigation on the part of highly trained and experienced investigators has failed to discover, ah, the identity of the lost heir, how may my own poor powers avail!" He finished his cocktail, gulped, and said blandly, "But it's Duane."

"What—" said Susan.

"I said, it's Duane. He is the heir. Anybody could see it with half an eye. Spittin' image of his dad. Here they come now."

They were alike and yet not alike at all. Both were rather tall, slender, and well made. Both had medium-brown hair. Both had grayish blue eyes. Neither was particularly handsome. Neither was exactly unhand-some. Their features were not at all alike in bone structure, yet neither had features that were in any way distinctive. Their description on a passport would not have varied by a single word. Actually they were altogether unlike each other.

With the salad, Major Briggs roused to point out a portrait that hung on the opposite wall.

"Jeremiah Lasher," he said, waving a pink hand in that direction. He glanced meaningly at Susan and added, "Do you see any resemblance, Miss Susan? I mean between my old friend and one of these lads here."

One of the lads—it was Dixon—wriggled perceptibly, but Duane smiled.

"We are not at all embarrassed, Miss Susan," he said pleasantly. "We are both quite accustomed to this sort of scrutiny." He laughed lightly, and Idabelle smiled, and Dixon said, "Does Miss Dare know about this?"

"Oh yes," said Idabelle, turning as quickly and attentively to him as she had turned to Duane. "There's no secret about it."

"No," said Dixon somewhat crisply. "There's certainly no secret about it."

There was, however, no further mention of the problem of identity during the rest of the evening. Indeed, it was a very calm and slightly dull evening except for the affair of Major Briggs and the draft.

That happened just after dinner. Susan and Mrs. Lasher were sitting over coffee in the drawing room, and the three men were presumably lingering in the dining room. It had been altogether quiet in the drawing room, yet there had not been audible even the distant murmur of the men's voices. Thus the queer, choked shout that arose in the dining room came as a definite shock to the two women.

It all happened in an instant. They hadn't themselves time to move or inquire before Duane appeared in the doorway. He was laughing but looked pale. "It's all right," he said. "Nothing's wrong."

"Duane," said Idabelle Lasher gaspingly, "what—"

"Don't be alarmed," he said swiftly. "It's nothing." He turned to look down the hall at someone approaching and added, "Here he is, safe and sound."

He stood aside, and Major Briggs appeared in the doorway. He looked so shocked and purple that both women moved hurriedly forward.

Idabelle Lasher said, "Here—on the divan. Ring for brandy, Duane. Lie down here, major."

"Oh no—no," said Major Briggs stertorously. "No. I'm quite all right."

Duane, however, supported him to the divan, and Dixon appeared in the doorway.

"What happened?" he said.

Major Briggs waved his hands feebly.

Duane said, "The major nearly went out the window."

"O-h-h-h—" It was Idabelle in a thin, long scream.

"Oh, it's all right," said Major Briggs, shaken. "I caught hold of the curtain. By God I'm glad you had heavy curtain rods at that window, Idabelle."

She was fussing around him, her hands shaking, her face ghastly under its makeup.

"But how could you . . ." she said jerkily, "what on earth—how could it have happened?"

"It's the draft," said the major irascibly. "The confounded draft on my neck. I got up to close the window and I nearly went out!"

"But how could you—" began Idabelle again.

"I don't know how it happened," said the major. "Just all at once—" A look of perplexity came slowly over his face. "Queer," said Major Briggs suddenly, "I suppose it was the draft. But it was exactly as if—" He stopped.

Idabelle cried, "As if what?"

"As if someone had pushed me," said the major.

Perhaps it was fortunate that the butler arrived just then, and there was the slight diversion of getting the major to stretch out full length on the divan and sip a restorative.

And somehow in the conversation it emerged that neither Dixon nor Duane had been in the dining room when the incident had happened.

"There'd been a disagreement over—well, it was over inheritance tax," said Dixon flushing. "Duane had gone to the library to look in an encyclopedia, and I had gone to my room to get the evening paper, which had some reference to it. So the major was alone when it happened. I knew nothing of it until I heard the commotion in here."

"I," said Duane, watching Dixon, "heard the major's shout from the library and hurried across."

That night, late, after Major Briggs had gone home, and Susan was again alone in the paralyzing magnificence of the French bedroom, she still kept thinking of the window and Major Briggs. And she put up her own window so circumspectly that she didn't get enough air during the night and woke struggling with a silk covered eiderdown under the impression that she herself was being thrust out the window.

It was only a nightmare, of course, induced as much as anything by her own hatred of heights. But it gave an impulse to the course she proposed to Mrs. Lasher that very morning.

It was true, of course, that the incident may have been exactly what it appeared to be, an accident. But if it was not accident, there were only two possibilities.

"Do you mean," cried Mrs. Lasher incredulously when Susan had finished her brief suggestion, "that I'm to say openly that Duane is my son! But you don't understand, Miss Dare. I'm not sure. It may be Dixon."

"I know," said Susan. "And I may be wrong. But I think it might help me if you will announce to—oh, only to Major Briggs and the two men—that you are convinced that it is Duane and are taking steps for legal recognition of the fact."

"Why? What do you think will happen? How will it help things to do that?"

"I'm not at all sure it will help," said Susan wearily. "But it's the only thing I see to do. And I think that you may as well do it right away."

"Today?" said Mrs. Lasher reluctantly.

"At lunch," said Susan inexorably. "Telephone to invite Major Briggs now."

"Oh, very well," said Idabelle Lasher. "After all, it will please Tom Briggs. He has been urging me to make a decision. He seems certain that it is Duane."

But Susan, present and watching closely, could detect nothing except that Idabelle Lasher, once she was committed to a course, undertook it with thoroughness. Her fondness for Duane, her kindness to Dixon, her air of relief at having settled so momentous a question, left nothing to be desired. Susan was sure that the men were convinced. There was, to be sure, a shade of triumph in Duane's demeanor, and he was magnanimous with Dixon—as, indeed, he could well afford to be. Dixon was silent and rather pale and looked as if he had not expected the decision and was a bit stunned by it. Major Briggs was incredulous at first and then openly jubilant and toasted all of them. Indeed, what with toasts and speeches on the part of Major Briggs, the lunch rather prolonged itself, and it was late afternoon before the major had gone and Susan and Mrs. Lasher met alone for a moment in the library.

Idabelle was flushed and worried.

"Was it all right, Miss Dare?" she asked in a stage whisper.

"Perfectly," said Susan.

"Then—then do you know—"

"Not yet," said Susan. "But keep Dixon here."

"Very well," said Idabelle.

The rest of the day passed quietly and not, from Susan's point of view, at all valuably, although Susan tried to prove something about the possible left-handedness of the real Derek. Badminton and several games of billiards resulted only in displaying a consistent right-handedness on the part of both the claimants.

Dressing again for dinner, Susan looked at herself ruefully in the great mirror. She had never in her life felt so utterly helpless, and the thought of Idabelle Lasher's faith in her hurt. After all, she ought to have realized her own limits: the problem that Mrs. Lasher had set was one that would have baffled—that, indeed, *had* baffled—experts. Who was she, Susan Dare, to attempt its solution?

The course of action she had laid out for Idabelle Lasher had certainly, thus far, had no development beyond heightening an already tense situation. It was quite possible that she was mistaken and that nothing at all would come of it. And if not, what then?

Idabelle Lasher's pale eyes and anxious, beseeching hands hovered again before Susan, and she jerked her satin slip savagely over her head—thereby pulling loose a shoulder strap and being obliged to ring for the maid, who sewed the strap neatly and rearranged Susan's hair.

"You'll be going to the party tonight, ma'am?" said the maid in a pleasant Irish accent.

"Party?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. Didn't you know? It's the Charity Ball. At the Dycke Hotel. In the Chandelier Ballroom. A grand, big party, ma'am. Madame is wearing her pearls. Will you bend your head, please, ma'am."

Susan bent her head and felt her white chiffon being slipped deftly over it. When she emerged she said, "Is the entire family going?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. And Major Briggs. There you are, ma'am—and I do say you look beautiful. There's orchids, ma'am, from Mr. Duane. And gardenias from Mr. Dixon. I believe," said the maid thoughtfully, "that I could put them all together. That's what I'm doing for madame."

"Very well," said Susan recklessly. "Put them all together."

It made a somewhat staggering decoration—staggering, thought Susan, but positively abandoned in luxuriousness. So, too, was the long town car that waited for them promptly at ten when they emerged from the towering apartment house. Susan, leaning back in her seat between Major Briggs and Idabelle Lasher, was always afterward to remember that short ride through crowded, lighted streets to the Dycke Hotel.

No one spoke. Perhaps only Susan was aware (and suddenly realized that she was aware) of the surging desires and needs and feelings that were bottled up together in the tonneau of that long, gliding car. She was aware of it quite suddenly and tinglingly.

Nothing had happened. Nothing, all through that long dinner from which they had just come, had been said that was at all provocative.

Yet all at once Susan was aware of a queer kind of excitement.

She looked at the black shoulders of the two men, Duane and Dixon, riding along beside each other. Dixon sat stiff and straight; his shoulders looked rigid and unmoving. He had taken it rather well, she thought; did he guess Idabelle's decision was not the true one? Or was he still stunned by it?

Or was there something back of that silence? Had she underestimated the force and possible violence of Dixon's reaction? Susan frowned; it was dangerous enough without that.

They arrived at the hotel. Their sudden emergence from the silence of the car, with its undercurrent of emotion, into brilliant lights and crowds and the gay lilt of an orchestra somewhere, had its customary tonic effect. Even Dixon shook off his air of brooding and, as they finally strolled into the Chandelier Room, and Duane and Mrs. Lasher danced smoothly into the revolving colors, asked Susan to dance.

They left the major smiling approval and buying cigarettes from a girl in blue pantaloons.

The momentary gaiety with which Dixon had asked Susan to dance faded at once. He danced conscientiously but without much spirit and said nothing. Susan glanced up at his face once or twice; his direct, dark blue eyes looked straight ahead, and his face was rather pale and set.

Presently Susan said, "Oh, there's Idabelle!"

At once Dixon lost step. Susan recovered herself and her small silver sandals rather deftly, and Idabelle, large and pink and jewel-laden, danced past them in Duane's arms. She smiled at Dixon anxiously and looked, above her pearls, rather worried.

Dixon's eyebrows were a straight dark line, and he was white around the mouth.

"I'm sorry, Dixon," said Susan. She tried to catch step with him, for the moment, and added, "Please don't mind my speaking about it. We are all thinking of it. I do think you behave very well."

He looked straight over her head, danced several somewhat erratic steps, and said suddenly, "It was so—unexpected. And you see, I was so sure of it."

"Why were you so sure?" asked Susan.

He hesitated, then burst out again. "Because of the dog," he said savagely, stepping on one of Susan's silver toes. She removed it with Spartan composure, and he said, "The calico dog, you know. And the green

curtains. If I had known there was so much money involved, I don't think I'd have come to—Idabelle. But then, when I did know, and this other—fellow turned up, why, of course, I felt like sticking it out!”

He paused, and Susan felt his arm tighten around her waist. She looked up, and his face was suddenly chalk white and his eyes blazing.

“Duane!” he said hoarsely. “I hate him. I could kill him with my own hands.”

The next dance was a tango, and Susan danced it with Duane. His eyes were shining and his face flushed with excitement and gaiety.

He was a born dancer, and Susan relaxed in the perfect ease of his steps. He held her very closely, complimented her gracefully, and talked all the time, and for a few moments Susan merely enjoyed the fast swirl of the lovely Argentine dance. Then Idabelle and Dixon went past, and Susan saw again the expression of Dixon's set white face as he looked at Duane and Idabelle's swimming eyes above her pink face and bare pink neck.

The rest of what was probably a perfect dance was lost on Susan, busy about certain concerns of her own, which involved some adjusting of the flowers on her shoulder. And the moment the dance was over she slipped away.

White chiffon billowed around her, and her gardenias sent up a warm fragrance as she huddled into a telephone booth. She made sure the flowers were secure and unrevealing upon her shoulder, steadied her breath, and smiled a little tremulously as she dialed a number she very well knew. It was getting to be a habit—calling Jim Byrne, her newspaper friend, when she herself had reached an impasse. But she needed him. Needed him at once.

“Jim—Jim,” she said. “It's Susan. Listen. Get into a white tie and come as fast as you can to the Dycke Hotel. The Chandelier Room.”

“What's wrong?”

“Well,” said Susan in a small voice “I've set something going that—that I'm afraid is going to be more than I meant—”

“You're good at stirring up things, Sue,” he said. “What's the trouble now?”

“Hurry, Jim,” said Susan. “I mean it.” She caught her breath. “I—I'm afraid,” she said.

His voice changed.

“I'll be right there. Watch for me at the door.” The telephone clicked, and Susan leaned rather weakly against the wall of the telephone booth.

She went back to the Chandelier Room. Idabelle Lasher, pink and worried looking, and Major Briggs and the two younger men made a little group standing together, talking. She breathed a little sigh of relief. So long as they remained together, and remained in that room surrounded by hundreds of witnesses, it was all right. Surely it was all

right. People didn't murder in cold blood when other people were looking on.

It was Idabelle who remembered her duties as hostess and suggested the fortune teller.

"She's very good, they say," said Idabelle. "She's a professional, not just doing it for a stunt, you know. She's got a booth in one of the rooms."

"By all means, my dear," said Major Briggs at once. "This way?" She put her hand on his arm and, with Duane at her other side, moved away, and Dixon and Susan followed. Susan cast a worried look toward the entrance. But Jim couldn't possibly get there in less than thirty minutes, and by that time they would have returned.

Dixon said, "Was it the major who convinced Idabelle that Duane is her son?"

Susan hesitated.

"I don't know," she said cautiously, "how strong the major's influence has been."

Her caution was not successful. As they left the ballroom and turned down a corridor, he whirled toward her.

"This thing isn't over yet," he said with the sudden savagery that had blazed out in him while they were dancing.

She said nothing, however, for Major Briggs was beckoning jauntily from a doorway.

"Here it is," he said in a stage whisper as they approached him. "Idabelle has already gone in. And would you believe it, the fortune teller charges twenty dollars a throw!"

The room was small: a dining room, probably, for small parties. Across the end of it a kind of tent had been arranged with many gaily striped curtains.

Possibly due to her fees, the fortune teller did not appear to be very popular; at least there were no others waiting, and no one came to the door except a bellboy with a tray in his hand who looked them over searchingly, murmured something that sounded very much like Mr. Haymow, and wandered away. Duane sat nonchalantly on the small of his back, smoking. The major seemed a bit nervous and moved restlessly about. Dixon stood just behind Susan. Odd that she could feel his hatred for the man lolling there in the armchair almost as if it were a palpable, living entity flowing outward in waves. Susan's sense of danger was growing sharper. But surely it was safe—so long as they were together.

The draperies of the tent moved confusedly and opened, and Idabelle stood there, smiling and beckoning to Susan.

"Come inside, my dear," she said. "She wants you, too."

Susan hesitated. But, after all, so long as the three men were together, nothing could happen. Dixon gave her a sharp look, and Susan moved

across the room. She felt a slight added qualm when she discovered that in an effort probably to add mystery to the fortune teller's trade, the swathing curtains had been arranged so that one entered a kind of narrow passage among them, which one followed with several turns before arriving at the looped-up curtain that made an entrance to the center of the maze and faced the fortune teller herself.

Susan stifled her uneasiness and sat down on some cushions beside Idabelle. The fortune teller, in Egyptian costume, with French accent and a sibylline manner, began to talk. Beyond the curtains and the drone of her voice Susan could hear little, although once she thought there were voices.

But the incident, when it happened, gave no warning.

There was only, suddenly, a great dull shock of sound that brought Susan taut and upright and left the fortune teller gasping and still and turned Idabelle Lasher's broad pinkness to a queer pale mauve.

"*What was that?*" whispered Idabelle in a choked way.

And the fortune teller cried, "It's a gunshot—out there!"

Susan stumbled and groped through the folds of draperies, trying to find the way through the entangling maze of curtains and out of the tent. Then all at once they were outside the curtains and staring at a figure that lay huddled on the floor, and there were people pouring in the door from the hall and confusion everywhere.

It was Major Briggs. And he'd been shot and was dead, and there was no revolver anywhere.

Susan felt ill and faint and after one long look backed away to the window. Idabelle was weeping, her face blotched. Dixon was beside her, and then suddenly someone from the hotel had closed the door into the corridor. And a bellhop's voice, the one who'd wandered into the room looking for Mr. Haymow, rose shrilly above the tumult.

"Nobody at all," he was saying. "Nobody came out of the room. I was at the end of the corridor when I heard the shot, and this is the only room on this side that's unlocked and in use tonight. So I ran down here, and I can swear that nobody came out of the room after the shot was fired. Not before I reached it."

"Was anybody here when you came in? What did you see?" It was the manager—fat, worried, but completely keeping the door behind him closed against further intrusion.

"Just this man on the floor. He was dead already."

"And nobody in the room?"

"Nobody. Nobody then. But I'd hardly got to him before there was people running into the room. And these three women came out of this tent."

The manager looked at Idabelle—at Susan.

"He was with you?" he asked Idabelle.

"Oh yes, yes," sobbed Idabelle. "It's Major Briggs."

The manager started to speak, stopped, began again. "I've sent for the police," he said. "You folks that were in his party—how many of you are there?"

"Just Miss Dare and me," sobbed Idabelle. "And—" she singled out Dixon and Duane—"these two men."

"All right. You folks stay right here, will you? And you too, miss—" indicating the fortune teller—"and the bellhop. The rest of you will go to a room across the hall. Sorry, but I'll have to hold you till the police get here."

It was not well received. There were murmurs of outrage and horrified looks over slender bare backs and the indignant rustle of trailing gowns, but the scattered groups that had pressed into the room did file slowly out again under the firm look of the manager.

The manager closed the door and said briskly, "Now, if you folks will be good enough to stay right here, it won't be long till the police arrive."

"A doctor," faltered Idabelle. "Can't we have a doctor?"

The manager looked at the sodden, lifeless body.

"You don't want a doctor, ma'am," he said. "What you want is an under—" He stopped abruptly and reverted to his professional suavity. "We'll do everything in our power to save your feelings, Mrs. Lasher," he said. "At the same time, we would much appreciate your—er—assistance. You see, the Charity Ball being what it is, we've got to keep this thing quiet." He was obviously distressed but still suave and competent. "Now then," he said, "I've got to make some arrangements—if you'll just stay here." He put his hand on the doorknob and then turned toward them again and said quite definitely, looking at the floor, "It would be just as well if none of you were to try to leave."

With that he was gone.

The fortune teller sank down into a chair and said, "Good gracious me," with some emphasis and a Midwestern accent. The bellhop retired nonchalantly to a corner and stood there looking very childish but very knowing in his smart white uniform. And Idabelle Lasher looked at the man at her feet and began to sob again. Duane tried to comfort her, while Dixon shoved his hands in his pockets and glowered at nothing.

"But I don't see," wailed Idabelle, "how it could have happened!"

Odd, thought Susan, that she didn't ask who did it. That would be the natural question. Or why? Why had a man who was—as she had said—like a brother to her been murdered?

Duane patted Idabelle's heaving bare shoulders and said something soothing, and Idabelle wrung her hands and cried again, "How could it have happened! We were all together—he was not alone a moment—"

Dixon stirred.

"Oh yes, he was alone," he said. "He wanted a drink, and I'd gone to hunt a waiter."

"And you forget to mention," said Duane icily, "that I had gone with you."

"You left this room at the same time, but that's all I know."

"I went at the same time you did. I stopped to buy cigarettes, and you vanished. I don't know where you went, but I didn't see you again. Not till I came back with the crowd into this room. Came back to find you already here."

"What do you mean by that?" Dixon's eyes were blazing, and his hands were working. "If you are accusing me of murder, say so straight out like a man instead of an insolent little puppy."

Duane's face was white but composed.

"All right," he said. "You know whether you murdered him or not. All I know is when I got back I found him dead and you already here."

"Duane!" cried Idabelle sharply, her laces swirling as she moved hurriedly between the two men. "Stop this! I won't have it. There'll be time enough for questions when the police come. When the police—" She dabbed at her mouth, which was still trembling, and at her chin, and her fingers went on to her throat, groped, closed convulsively, and she screamed, "*My pearls!*"

"Pearls?" said Dixon staring, and Duane darted forward.

"Pearls—they're gone!"

The fortune teller had started upward defensively, and the bellhop's eyes were like two saucers.

Susan said, "They are certainly somewhere in the room, Mrs. Lasher. And the police will find them for you. There's no need to search for them now."

Susan pushed a chair toward her, and she sank helplessly into it.

"Tom murdered—and now my pearls gone—and I don't know which is Derek. I—I *don't know what to do*. . . ." Her shoulders heaved, and her face was hidden in her handkerchief, and her corseted fat body collapsed into lines of utter despair.

Susan said deliberately, "The room will be searched, Mrs. Lasher, every square inch of it—ourselves included. There is nothing," said Susan with soft emphasis, "nothing that they will miss."

Then Dixon stepped forward. His face was set, and there was an ominous flare of light in his eyes.

He put his hand upon Idabelle's shoulder to force her to look up into his face and brushed aside Duane, who had moved quickly forward, too, as if his defeated rival had threatened Idabelle.

"Why—why, Dixon," faltered Idabelle Lasher, "you look so strange. What is it? Don't, my dear, you are hurting my shoulder—"

Duane cried, "Let her alone. Let her alone." And then to Idabelle: "Don't pay any attention to him. He's out of his mind. He's—" He clutched at Dixon's arm, but Dixon turned, gave him one black look, and

thrust him away so forcefully that Duane staggered backward against the walls of the tent and clutched at the curtains to save himself from falling.

"Look here," said Dixon grimly to Idabelle, "what do you mean when you say, as you did just now, that you don't know which is Derek? What do you mean? You must tell me. It isn't fair. *What do you mean?*"

His fingers sank into her bulging flesh. She stared as if hypnotized, choking. "I meant just that, Dixon. I don't know yet. I only said I had decided in order to—"

"In order to what?" said Dixon inexorably.

A queer little tingle ran along Susan's nerves, and she edged toward the door. She must get help. Duane's eyes were strange and terribly bright. He still clutched the garishly striped curtains behind him. Susan took another silent step and another toward the door without removing her gaze from the tableau.

Idabelle Lasher looked up into Dixon's face, and her lips moved flabbily, and she said the strangest thing, "*How like your father you are, Derek.*"

Susan's heart got up into her throat and left a very curious empty place in the pit of her stomach. She probably moved a little farther toward the door but was never sure, for all at once, while mother and son stared revealingly and certainly at each other, Duane's white face and queer bright eyes vanished.

Susan was going to run. She was going to fling herself out the door and shriek for help. For there was going to be another murder in that room. There was going to be another murder, and she couldn't stop it, she couldn't do anything, she couldn't even scream a warning. Then Duane's black figure was outlined against the tent again. And he had a revolver in his hand. The fortune teller said, "Oh my God," and the white streak that had been the bellhop dissolved rapidly behind a chair.

"Call him your son if you want to," Duane said in an odd, jerky way, addressing Mrs. Lasher and Derek confusedly. "Then your son's a murderer. He killed Briggs. He hid in the folds of this curtain till the room was full of people, and then he came out again. He left his revolver there. And here it is. *Don't move.* One word or move out of any of you, and I'll shoot." He stopped to take a breath. He was smiling a little and panting. "Don't move," he said again sharply. "I'm going to hand you over to the police, Mr. *Derek*. You won't be so anxious to say he's your son then, perhaps. It's his revolver. He killed Briggs with it because Briggs favored me. He knew it, and he did it for revenge."

He was crossing the room with smooth steps, holding the revolver poised threateningly, and his eyes were rapidly shifting from one to another. Susan hadn't the slightest doubt that the smallest move would bring a revolver shot crashing through someone's brain. He's going to es-

cape, she thought, he's going to escape. I can't do a thing. And he's mad with rage. Mad with the terrible excitement of having already killed once.

Duane caught the flicker of Susan's eyes. He was near her now, so near that he could have touched her. He cried, "It's you that's done this! You that advised her! You were on his side! Well—" He'd reached the door now, and there was nothing they could do. He was gloating openly, the way of escape before him. In an excess of dreadful triumphant excitement, he cried, "I'll shoot you first—it's too bad, when you are so pretty. But I'm going to do it."

It's the certainty, thought Susan numbly; Idabelle is so certain that Derek is the other one that Duane knows it, too. He knows there's no use in going on with it. And he knew, when I said what I said about the pearls, that I know.

She felt oddly dizzy. Something was moving. Was she going to faint—was she—something was moving, and it was the door behind Duane. It was moving silently, very slowly.

Susan steeled her eyes not to reveal that knowledge. If only Idabelle and Derek would not move—would not see those panels move and betray what they had seen.

Duane laughed.

And Derek moved again, and Idabelle tried to thrust him away from her, and Duane's revolver jerked and jerked again, and the door pushed Duane suddenly to one side and there was a crash of glass, and voices and flashing movement. Susan knew only that someone had pinioned Duane from behind and was holding his arms close to his side. Duane gasped, his hand writhed and dropped the revolver.

Then somebody at the door dragged Duane away; Susan realized confusedly that there were police there. And Jim Byrne stood at her elbow. He looked unwontedly handsome in white tie and tails but very angry. He said, "Go home, Sue. Get out of here."

It was literally impossible for Susan to speak or move. Jim stared at her as if nobody else was in the room, got out a handkerchief, and wiped his forehead with it. "I've aged ten years in the last five minutes," he said. He glanced around. Saw Major Briggs' body there on the floor—saw Idabelle Lasher and Derek—saw the fortune teller and the bellhop.

"Is that Mrs. Jeremiah Lasher over there?" he said to Susan.

Mrs. Lasher opened her eyes, looked at him, and closed them again.

Jim looked meditatively at a revolver in his hand, put it in his pocket, and said briskly, "You can stay for a while, Susan. Until I hear the whole story. Who shot Major Briggs?"

Susan's lips moved, and Derek straightened up and cried, "Pooh, it's my revolver all right. But I didn't kill Major Briggs—I don't expect any one to believe me, but I didn't."

"He didn't," said Susan wearily. "Duane killed Major Briggs. He killed him with Derek's revolver, perhaps, but it was Duane who did the murder."

Jim did not question her statement, but Derek said eagerly, "How do you know? Can you prove it?"

"I think so," said Susan. "You see, Duane had a revolver when I danced with him. It was in his pocket. That's when I phoned for you, Jim. But I was too late."

"But how—" said Jim.

"Oh, when Duane accused Derek, he actually described the way he himself murdered Major Briggs and concealed himself and the revolver in the folds of the tent until the room was full of people and he could quietly mingle with them as if he had come from the hall. We were all staring at Major Briggs. It was very simple. Duane had got hold of Derek's revolver and knew it would be traced to Derek and the blame put upon him, since Derek had every reason to wish to revenge himself upon Major Briggs."

Idabelle had opened her eyes. They looked a bit glassy but were more sensible. "Why—" she said, "why did Duane kill Major Briggs?"

"I suppose because Major Briggs had backed him. You see," said Susan gently, "one of the claimants had to be an impostor and a deliberate one. And the attack upon Major Briggs last night suggested either that he knew too much or was a conspirator himself. The exact coinciding of the stories (particularly clever on Major Briggs' part) and the fact that Duane turned up after Major Briggs had had time to search for someone who would fulfill the requirements necessary to make a claim to being your son, seemed to me an indication of conspiracy; besides, the very nature of the case involved imposture. But there had to be a conspiracy, someone had to tell one of the claimants about the things upon which to base his claim, especially about the memories of the baby things—the calico dog," said Susan with a little smile, "and the plush teddy bear. It had to be someone who had known you long ago and could have seen those things before you put them away in the safe. Someone who knew all your circumstances."

"You mean that Major Briggs planned Duane's claim—planned the whole thing? But why—" Idabelle's eyes were full of tears again.

"There's only one possible reason," said Susan. "He must have needed money very badly, and Duane, coming into thirty million dollars, would have been obliged to share his spoils."

"Then Derek—I mean Dixon—I mean," said Idabelle confusedly, clutching at Dixon, "this one. He really is my son?"

"You know he is," said Susan. "You realized it yourself when you were under emotional stress and obliged to feel instead of reason about it. However, there's reason for it, too. *He is Derek.*"

"He—is—Derek," said Idabelle catching at Susan's words. "You are sure?"

"Yes," said Susan quietly. "He is Derek. You see, I'd forgotten something. Something physical that never changes all through life. That is, a sense of rhythm. Derek has no sense of rhythm and has never had. Duane is a born dancer."

Idabelle said "Thank God!" She looked at Susan, looked at Derek, and quite suddenly became herself again. She got up briskly, glanced at Major Briggs' body, and said calmly, "We'll try to keep some of this quiet. I'll see that things are done decently—after all, poor old fellow, he did love his comforts. Now then. Oh yes, if someone will just see the manager of the hotel about my pearls—"

Susan put a startled hand to her gardenias.

"I'd forgotten your pearls, too. Here they are." She fumbled a moment among the flowers, detached a string of flowing beauty, and held it toward Idabelle. "I took them from Duane while we were dancing."

"Duane," said Idabelle. "But—" She took the pearls and said incredulously, "They *are* mine!"

"He had taken them while he danced with you. During the next dance you passed me, and I saw that your neck was bare."

Jim turned to Susan.

"Are you sure about that, Susan?" he said. "I've managed to get the outline of the story, you know. And I don't think the false claimant would have taken such a risk. Not with thirty million in his pocket, so to speak."

"Oh, they were for the major," said Susan. "At least, I think that was the reason. I don't know yet, but I think we'll find that he was pretty hard-pressed for cash and had to have some right away. Immediately. Duane probably balked at demanding money of Mrs. Lasher so soon, so the major suggested the pearls. And Duane was in no position to refuse the major's demands. Then, you see, he had no pearls because I took them; he and the major must have quarreled, and Duane, who had already foreseen that he would be at Major Briggs' mercy as long as the major lived, was already prepared for any opportunity to kill him. After he had once got to Idabelle, he no longer needed the major. He had armed himself with Derek's revolver after what must have seemed to him a heaven-sent chance to stage an accident had failed. Mrs. Lasher's decision removed any remaining small value that the major was to him and made Major Briggs only a menace. But I think he wasn't sure just what he would do or how—he acceded to the major's demand for the pearls because it was at the moment the simplest course. But he was ready and anxious to kill him, and when he knew that the pearls had gone from his pocket, he must have guessed that I had taken them. And he decided to get rid of Major Briggs at once, before he could possibly tell

anything, for any story the major chose to tell would have been believed by Mrs. Lasher. Later, when I said that the police would search the room, he knew that I knew. And that I knew the revolver was still here."

"Is that why you advised me to announce my decision that Duane was my son?" demanded Idabelle Lasher.

Susan shuddered and tried not to look at that black heap across the room.

"No," she said steadily. "I didn't dream of—murder. I only thought that it might bring the conspiracy that evidently existed somewhere into the open."

Jim said, "Here are the police."

Queer, thought Susan much later, riding along the drive in Jim's car, with her white chiffon flounces tucked in carefully and her green velvet wrap pulled tightly about her throat against the chill night breeze and the scent of gardenias mingling with the scent of Jim's cigarette—queer how often her adventures ended like this: driving silently homeward in Jim's car.

She glanced at the irregular profile behind the wheel and said, "I suppose you know you saved my life tonight."

His mouth tightened in the little glow from the dashlight. Presently he said, "How did you know he had the pearls in his pocket?"

"Felt 'em," said Susan. "And you can't imagine how terribly easy it was to take them. In all probability a really brilliant career in picking pockets was sacrificed when I was provided with moral scruples."

The light went to yellow and then red, and Jim stopped. He turned and gave Susan a long look through the dusk and then slowly took her hand in his own warm fingers for a second or two before the light went to green again.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Great outdoors adventure, Native American lore, a plot with some nifty twists, and characters who stick to the ribs add up to an exciting read in William Kent Krueger's second Cork O'Connor mystery, **Boundary Waters** (Pocket, \$23). The title comes from the name given the uninhabited country of forests, rapids, lakes, and small islands along the Midwest American-Canadian border. Stranded somewhere in the heart of the Boundary Waters is a young country singer named Shiloh whose mother Marais, a Native American singer from Cork's own town of Aurora, was murdered when Shiloh was a child. The murderer was never caught. Now Shiloh's father has come to ask Cork, Aurora's former sheriff, to help find her. The men become a party when they are joined by two men claiming to be FBI agents and an Ojibwe ex-con and his young son. They seek a woman who left civilization behind to find herself and who may be hopelessly lost if the snows come before they can retrieve her. Cork is soon up against the elements, a web of lies, and a military-trained hired killer. Lots of bang for your buck here.

Thomas and Charlotte Pitt return in Anne Perry's newest Victorian mystery, **Bedford Square** (Ballantine, \$24.95). A poorly dressed corpse is found on the doorstep of a retired officer, General Brandon Balantyne, a man generally thought to be above reproach. As the Bow Street superintendent sent to investigate, Thomas Pitt is bothered by the discovery of the general's distinctive snuffbox in the dead man's pocket. Charlotte, who knows Balantyne from a previous case of her husband's, stoutly defends the man's honor even as she admits he's hiding something. As always, Perry provides a rich canvas of detail and wonderful characters acting out powerful human emotions against the repressive background of Victorian social mores. Fans will love this one.

When it was published in hardcover last year, reviewers applauded Bret Lott's **The Hunt Club** for its South Carolina Low-Country milieu and its compelling characters. Now it's out in trade paperback, and sus-

pense fans should warm to it with equal fervor (HarperPerennial, \$13). Narrated by a resilient and resourceful fifteen-year-old, Huger Dillard, the book opens with the discovery of a murdered man. A sign on the body claims the deed was the work of the victim's wife, but this "confession" poses more questions than it answers. Before the final pages, long-buried secrets come to light, Huger and his blind uncle escape deadly danger, and a boy makes the passage to manhood in a journey fraught with peril. Hard to put down, this one lingers long after the last page is turned.

Missing Marlene (Kensington, \$20) by Evan Marshall gives an insider's peek into the offices (and the mind) of small-time literary agent Jane Stuart. It was Jane's late husband and mentor, a prominent name in publishing, who made their small agency click. Since his death Jane has struggled to hang onto the writers she represents and to be both mother and father to her son. She certainly doesn't need the disappearance of Marlene, her live-in help and the daughter of an old college roommate. The out-of-town mother is hysterical, and Jane is left with the realization that she'd never much liked Marlene and never made much of an attempt to get to know the girl. Finding her isn't going to be easy. This is a plot that requires a long stretch of the reader's credibility, although both setting and characters do compensate.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY/AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

Donald North killed his uncle by bludgeoning him with the silver candlestick. The other five nephews were convicted of attempted murder.

NO.	NEPHEW	WIFE	METHOD	FROM	BY
1	Edward Olmstead	Janice	arsenic in the cocoa	L.A.	plane
2	Bertrand Ruggles	Helene	hypodermic with strychnine	Reno	bus
3	Donald North	Greta	bludgeoning with candlestick	Denver	car
4	Andrew Quigley	Louise	shot in chest with pistol	Chicago	plane
5	Charles Miller	Imogene	stabbed with stiletto	St. Louis	car
6	Frank Parker	Kathy	cord around his throat	El Paso	bus

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Debra Ann Fiorini of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Honorable mentions go to Al Cross of Sacramento, California; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Robert Maxey of Rockwell, North Carolina; Robert Kes-



ling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Michelle R. Morse of Coral Springs, Florida; Nicholas P. Machara of Germantown, Maryland; Mark Truman of Tustin, California; Mary E. Durham of Austin, Texas; and Dorothy Tabor of Cookeville, Tennessee.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

DIAL "S" FOR SPY by Debra Ann Fiorini

"He's not here," Joanna whispered nervously into her cellular phone. "Patch me through to Agent Gonzalez . . . and hurry."

Gone, sadly enough, were the good old days of poison darts and cigarette cases made into cameras. Now part of the new standard issue for operatives was a cell phone. Today, though, Joanna wasn't complaining. Wang Ye, a defecting dissident, was supposed to be waiting in this phone booth on this corner for Agent Joanna Mason to escort him to the embassy. Now she was here and he was not.

"Gonzalez here." The gruff voice suddenly barking at her through the phone line snapped Joanna out of her thoughts.

"It's Mason. I'm across from St. Bonaventure's right now, but Wang Ye is missing. That could only mean one thing, sir. The other side got to him first before he could spill what he knows about the hostages."

"St. Bonaventure's? Didn't we stop using that as a meeting spot ever since the problem with the phone booth?"

"Problem, sir?"

"Any call placed to our embassy from that booth automatically triggers the trap door. We haven't fixed it yet. Didn't you get the memo?"

Joanna sighed. "Um . . . yes, sir. I have to go. I believe I know where Wang Ye is."

Switching off her cell phone, Joanna hoped the highly important Mr. Wang would not be angry when she pulled him out of the Company's subterranean holding cell. She just had one thing to do first: make herself a note to start reading Company memos.

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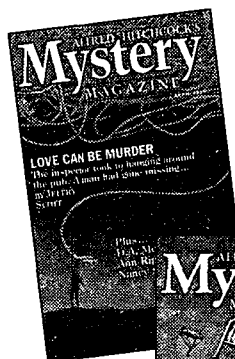
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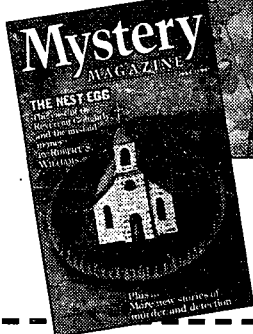
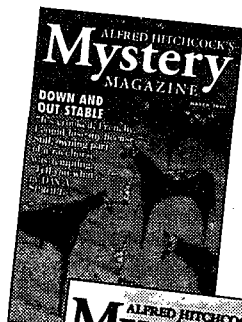
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Breakthrough dieting technique uses metabolic enhancers so you can lose unwanted pounds—in just six days!

by Anne Regalia

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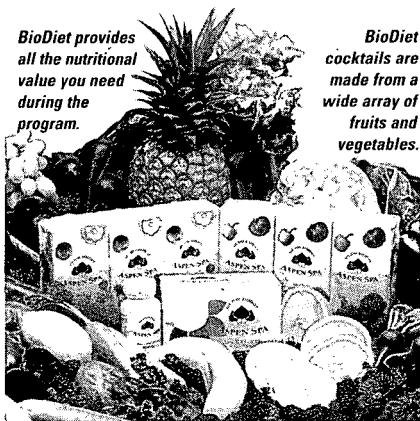
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Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington

It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters.

Dermal-K strengthens capillaries, enhances coagulation and heals weakened tissues. Apply Dermal-K twice a day and watch spider veins fade...and finally disappear!

Scientific solution. This is the very same cream long used by dermatologists and plastic surgeons to prevent bleeding during surgery. It's so easy to use: just apply Dermal-K to moistened skin twice a day. Once you achieve desired effects, just use Dermal-K once a day, three days a week to prevent more spider veins from resurfacing.

A two-ounce jar will last from one to three months, depending on the size of the area you are treating. It can also help fade scar tissue, relieve pain and inflammation from skin irritations, or sunburns, and promote natural healing of damaged skin.

Why wait...it's risk-free! Dermal-K lets you get rid of unsightly veins painlessly. It is backed by a 30-day manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. Try it for yourself, and if you are not absolutely satisfied, return the unused portion within 30 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

Apply Dermal-K to moistened skin twice a day and those ugly spider veins will be



Going...



Going...



Gone!



Dermal-K \$29.95 \$5 S&H
Buy two or more jars \$24.95 each
Please mention promotional code 2967-15995

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966



To order by mail, send check or money order for the total amount including S&H. To charge it to your credit card, enclose your account number and expiration date.

Virginia residents only—please add 4.5% sales tax.



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